Daisuke Aizawa
Illustration by
Touzai
04
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THE
Eminence
IN
Shadow

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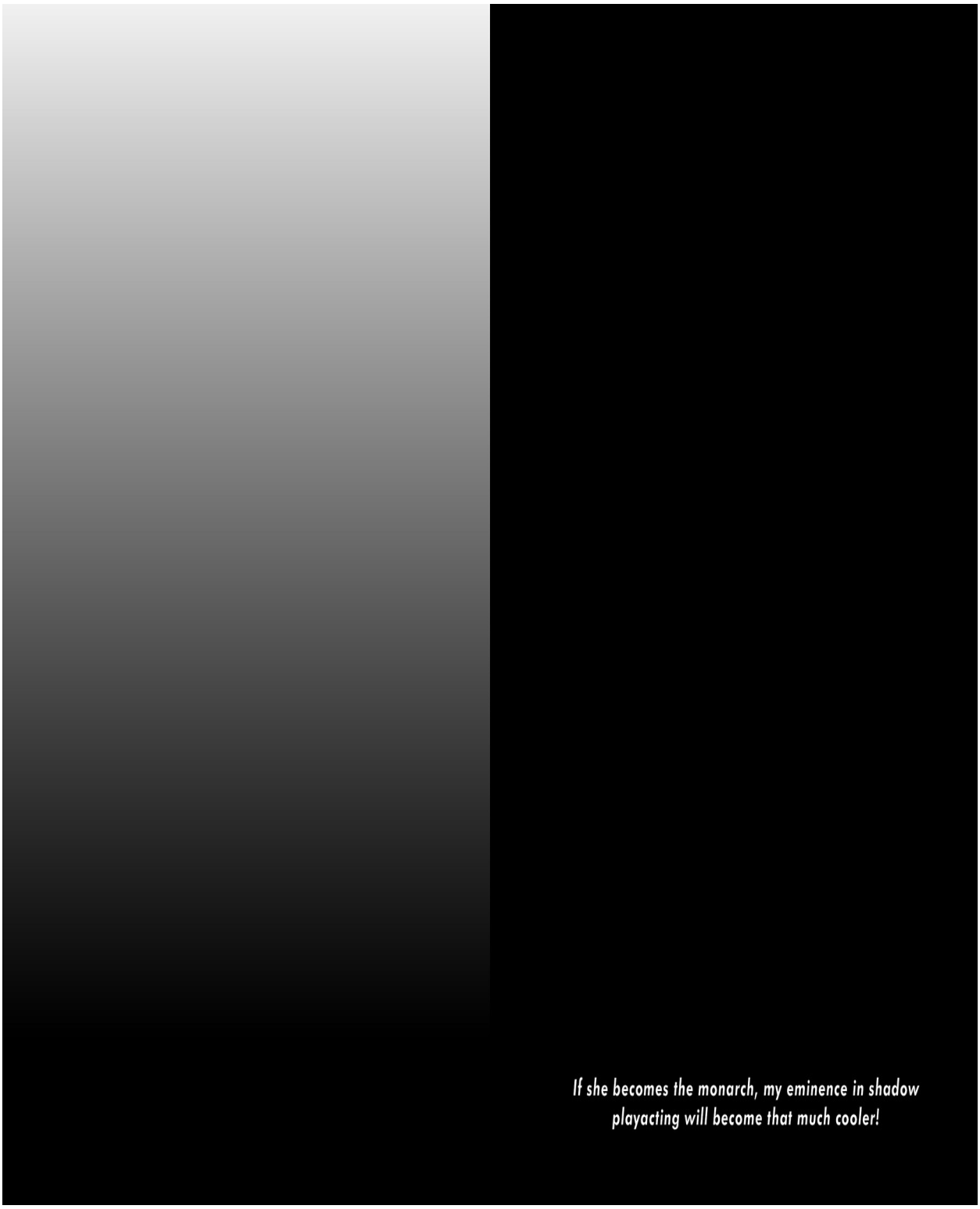
“The lion…will wake.”


If she becomes the monarch, my eminence in shadow playacting will become that much cooler!

"The banquet of slaughter begins now."
Mordred
Beta
Rose Oriana
Number 664
Epsilon
"I'll pick up where my father left off..."
Number 665
"We want to check our answers on a few things. On the Black Rose, on the magical beasts...and on Diablos."
The Eminence in Shadow

"The skies are under my dominion.
Engrave that knowledge in your flesh… within my
Shadow
birdcage of darkness."

"You look so similar..."
"You're guests of Messiah now."
Akane Nishino
Akira Nishino
"For now, all we can do is pray he's not our enemy."
Haitani
"You're gonna wanna think loooong and hard about the position you're in."
Yuudai Saejima

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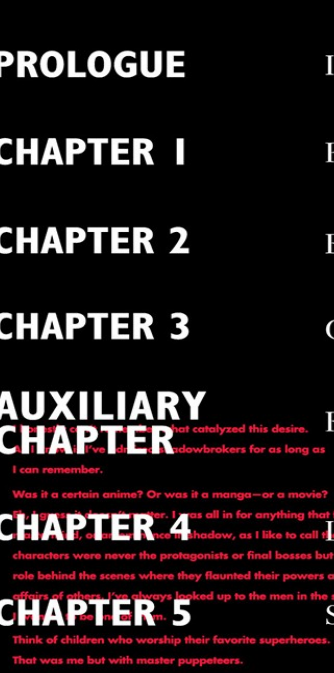

The Eminence in Shadow

04

The Eminence in Shadow

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Daisuke Aizawa

Illustration by
Touzai

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

The Eminence in Shadow 04
DAISUKE AIZAWA
Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher
Cover art by Touzai
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I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

It's Time for a War in the Oriana Kingdom!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Prologue

Prologue

It’s Time for a War in the Oriana Kingdom!

Sometimes, people realize it when they’re having a dream.

For Rose Oriana, it always happens at the same moment.

In the dream, she’s at the Bushin Festival.

Her father is standing before her.

She draws her blade and stabs him with it.

Slowly but surely, slowly but surely.

The world is quiet, and the only things gently moving are Rose, her father, and the sword.

Slowly but surely, slowly but surely.

The blade runs her father through.

She can’t stop it. She can’t pull it back. Time just flows forward, cruel in its slowness and its surety.

For as long as she lives, Rose will never be able to forget the way his flesh felt as it gave, or how warm his blood was as it sprayed her.

She can’t cry. She can’t scream. She certainly can’t run.

Her father looks at her. He’s trying to tell her something.

Then, he extends his arms toward her—and wraps his hands around her throat.

“I will never forgive you.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m…”

Every morning, Rose wakes to the sound of her own voice.

All her room has in it is a bed and a small desk. She’s in a Shadow Garden base in the Oriana Kingdom.

“Father…”

Tears stream down her cheeks.

The image from the nightmare is burning into her retinas.

What had her father tried to say to her on that fateful day?

Had he resented her?

Had he hated her?

Were those words he spoke in her nightmare truly how he felt?

Rose clutches at her sweat-drenched sheets.

Then, someone knocks on her door.

It's Number 664.

"Number 666, it's time."

"On my way."

Rose dries her tears and gets changed.

She takes off the thin shirt sticking to her sweaty skin, and a mound of black slime coils its way across her bare flesh.

It's her slime bodysuit.

It conducts magic at a tremendous rate and can be molded freely into any shape or form. When Rose runs her magic through it, it strengthens to the point where the average dark knight would have trouble so much as scratching it.

The bodysuits are groundbreaking enough they could revolutionize the entire dark knight world, and yet they're only one of the many innovations the Shadow Garden has made.

When Rose finishes changing and steps out into the hallway, she finds her usual squadmates waiting for her—Numbers 664 and 665.

"Good morning," she greets them.

"Let's get a move on," Number 664 replies.

"Mooornin', 666," says 665.

Number 664 sets off at a brisk pace, and Rose and 665 follow her.

The hallway's walls and ceiling are artificial, gray, and unadorned. They're made of a secret material the Shadow Garden is researching called "reinforced concrete." It's unimpressive to look at, but that just makes the carpet and lighting stand out all the more.

The lights are made from specially cut, highly transparent crystal glass. Their glow casts radiant shadows across the hallway.

They, too, are the fruits of a manufacturing process exclusive to the Shadow Garden, used to make Mitsugoshi's high-end chandeliers.

The cheapest models cost a whopping ten million *zeni*, but even so, they fly off the shelves like there's no tomorrow.

Rumor has it that, someday, Mitsugoshi, Ltd. plans on putting its myriad techniques to use in the construction industry.

Rose lets out a small sigh at the sheer degree of engineering prowess on display in just that one hallway.

It still amazes her how all of it originally sprang from Shadow's Shadow Wisdom. Not only are his combat skills ferocious, his intellect seems nigh bottomless, too. She wonders how he came to be that way.

"I heard that," Number 664 says. By "that," she means Rose's sigh. "If there's something weighing on you, you should tell me about it. I can tell you've got a lot going on."

"No, no, it's nothing."

"…If you say so."

Number 664 is a petite elf a year older than Rose. She's strict but responsible, which is why she was chosen as a squad leader.

Number 665 is an elf with a lazy streak who's the same age as Rose. She always looks like she's about to doze off.

Not only are they both attractive, most standards would rate each of them as a first-rate dark knight.

Within their organization, however, both of them are closer to the bottom of its rankings than to the top.

Rose is Number 666.

The numbers refer strictly to the order in which they joined. They aren't a ranking system.

However, each set of 100 tends to be a good deal stronger than the next, so the numbers end up being a decent measure anyway.

That said, there are exceptions.

Rose got a chance to see Number 559 spar once.

Her opponent was Number 89. With a four hundred–plus numerical gap, Number 559 shouldn't have stood a chance.

Yet she won all the same—an overwhelming victory.

This earned her the right to challenge the Numbers.

The Shadow Garden is surprisingly regimented.

Rose felt like her magic had gotten stronger. She felt as though joining the Shadow Garden would let her start changing things. She felt that if she became strong, she could save the Oriana Kingdom.

But she hasn't been able to change anything.

"I need to work even harder…," she murmurs to herself as she chases after the two elves ahead of her.

Today, Number 559 will be heading up their mission.

The three of them leave the base in the dead of night and silently race across a snow-covered field.

Rose spots a fortress off in the distance.

An attractive girl stands on a small hill overlooking it.

"There you are," she says as she turns around.

Her strawberry blond hair sways elegantly behind her. Illuminated in the moonlight as she is, even a fellow girl like Rose can see how sublimely beautiful she is.

She's the Shadow Garden's one and only Number 559.

"Our apologies for keeping you waiting."

"You know the details?" 559 says, succinct as ever.

"No, we were just told that it would involve Fort First."

"I see."

Number 559 exhales a puff of white as she turns her back to them and begins explaining.

“Two days ago, Fort First fell into the Perv Faction’s hands.”

At the moment, the Oriana Kingdom is locked in a fierce conflict between the Perv Faction and the Anti-Perv Faction. No major battles have broken out yet, but minor skirmishes in outlying regions are becoming a regular occurrence.

“Fort First is a small fortress near the Midgar border of little strategic value. The important part is that the Cult secretly mobilized the Children of Diablos to take it.”

The First Children are the Cult’s cream of the crop. Using them to take an unimportant fortress would be a complete waste of resources.

“There’s more to Fort First than meets the eye,” Number 559 goes on. “Our job is to sneak in and find out what the Cult is after. I take it you know why you were chosen for the mission?”

She turns her gaze toward Rose, who replies, “Because I already know the fort’s layout.”

Fort First lies cradled in the mountains, and the royal family often uses it as a vacation home to escape the summer’s heat.

“That’s part of it. But not all.”

With that, Number 559 descends the hill and starts making her way across the snowfield as gracefully as a bird soaring through the sky.

Rose and the others hurriedly follow her.

“I was the one who nominated you, Rose Oriana.”

Rose falters for a moment at being called by her real name.

Among the Shadow Garden’s ranks, the identity of Number 666 as Rose Oriana is something of an open secret.

“Master Shadow granted you power.”

Numbers 664 and 665 look at Rose in shock. “What?”

The only ones granted power by Shadow himself were the initial seven—the Seven Shadows. The Seven Shadows stand in a league of their own in the Shadow Garden, and that blessing Shadow had given them is part of what makes them so special.

Rose gives them a small nod. “…It’s true.”

Sure enough, Shadow was the one who saved her from the ravages of the possession.

“He did the same for me,” Number 559 says.

“Really…?”

“Master Shadow granted me strength, just as he did to you. Aside from the Seven Shadows, you and I are the only two to have received that privilege.” She casts Rose a scrutinizing gaze, then mutters, “So weak.”

“ _____ ”

“As Master Shadow’s faithful servant, it’s my duty to purge any who are unworthy of his grace.”

She turns her back on Rose.

Soldiers’ corpses are left piled high within Fort First.

Rose bites her lip as she looks down from atop the rampart.

Her actions are what started the war, and this is where it’s brought her.

Her soldiers are dying, and her people are suffering.

To Rose, however, the most painful part of all is that she’s helpless to do anything about it.

Perhaps she was conceited.

Perhaps she believed that what she did would change something.

But now, she’s nothing more than one of the Shadow Garden’s foot soldiers. The organization is filled to bursting with people stronger and wiser than she is, and joining them has taught her just how small she truly is.

“What’s wrong, 666?”

What role can she play in this war?

It feels like the soldiers’ pain-contorted faces are all glaring resentfully at her.

“Number 666!”

Rose is jolted back to the present by the sensation of someone shaking her shoulders.

Number 664 looks at her worriedly.

“Sorry, it’s nothing,” Rose replies.

Number 664 smiles. “Try not to let it get to you, okay?”

Number 559 has been observing the Cult’s movements, and she speaks up. “They’re on the move.”

A group of people dressed in black robes emerges from the fortress’s moonlit front gate.

“There’s over forty of them,” Number 665 notes.

Number 559’s lips contort into a pleased smile. “That’s more than I expected.”

“What do we do?”

“Follow them from a distance.”

Number 559 takes the lead, and the four of them head through the darkness. They take great care not to make a sound.

The robed group makes its way into a forest near the fortress.

“We’ll use the forest to let us get closer,” Number 559 says.

“Roger that.”

“And keep your guard up. Given how strong they look, they’re probably all First Children.”

“All of them?!”

The First Children are the strongest forces the Cult has, and there aren’t all that many of them. Having forty of them all in the same place is a highly unusual occurrence.

“What’s in the forest, 666?” 559 asks.

“Just some historical ruins. It used to be a shrine memorializing those lost in the battle against Diablos, but most of it’s fallen into disrepair.”

“Ruins, hmm. I figured as much…”

Number 559 seems to understand what’s going on.

They enter the forest and gradually close the gap between them and the Cult members. Before long, they arrive at the ruins.

The robed group surrounds the shrine’s altar.

Rose and the others watch them quietly from behind cover.

“There’s no mistaking it… This…a door…”

Rose can just barely make out their leader’s words. His face is illuminated by torchlight, and she can see the scars on the middle-aged man’s cheeks.

“That’s Kouadoi the Gale, one of the Cult’s leaders.”

“…I see.” Number 559’s lips contort into a smile once again.

“To the altar…with…left to…Queen Reina.” Kouadoi pulls a petite woman from the crowd of robed figures and makes her stand in front of the altar.

When she takes off her robe, Rose’s throat trembles.

“M-Mother…?”

The woman is, without a doubt, the very same woman who birthed her. The Cult must have threatened her into following their orders.

Rose doesn’t understand. She was told that all the Oriana royalty were under the Anti-Perv Faction’s protection.

“Why is my mother here…?”

Did the Cult catch her? Or did the Shadow Garden simply lie to her?

Rose’s mind races at a mile a minute.

“Put your hand there.”

When Queen Reina follows Kouadoi’s order and holds out her hand, magical runes flash brightly across the altar’s surface.

“Just as we thought… Royalty… Blood is the key…”

The light dies down, leaving a small band floating above the altar.

It’s a ring.

“Sure enough… This is…the Oriana Kingdom’s…”

Kouadoi places the ring in a small box.

“Get ready to fight,” says Number 559. The twisted smile never leaves her face.

Number 664 offers her a hushed objection. “B-but this was supposed to be a recon mission!”

“That ring is the key. We need to wipe them out and retrieve it.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything. What’s this ‘key’?”

“That’s need-to-know. And right now, the only thing you three need to know is that failure to retrieve it isn’t an option. All you should be thinking about is how we can do that.”

Peons like Number 664 and Rose are rarely privy to confidential information. The Shadow Garden runs a tight ship when it comes to information management.

“But we’re at a huge disadvantage!”

There are four of them and forty Cultists. They’re outnumbered ten to one.

“So?” Number 559 coolly draws her ebony blade. “It’s execution time.”

“P-please, wait!” Rose cries. “That’s my mother down—”

Number 559 ignores her.

She dashes forward, reaching the altar in the blink of an eye. Her blade extends in her hand.

She plans on mowing everyone down in one fell swoop.

“Wh-who goes there?!”

The Children draw their swords as well.

The moment they do, a horribly shrill noise rings out.

The strike from Number 559 cleaves through swords like toothpicks and bisects some of the Children with the same ease.

“It’s the Shadow Garden! Spread out!!”

A shock wave so powerful runs through the area it’s evocative of an attack from the Seven Shadows themselves.

An alarmed stir runs through the Cultists, but they quickly regain their composure and scatter. However, Number 559 simply uses that time to start cutting them down one by one.

For her next target, she chooses Queen Reina.

“Mother!”

In that moment, an image of her father’s face flashes through Rose’s mind.

It’s an image she’s seen over and over in her dreams. Pierced through the chest, he coughs up blood as the life fades from him.

“NOOOOO!!”

Rose reaches out, grabs her mother, and dodges the strike from Number 559.

The queen looks at Rose in shock.

“Rose…?”

“Mother!”

Rose holds her mother tight.

“Why? Why would you attack my mother?!”

Her honey-colored eyes burn with rage as she glares at Number 559.

“…Hmph.”

Number 559 gives her a coldhearted smile.

Rose squeezes Queen Reina tight to protect her, but the fact remains that they’re surrounded by Cultists. The Cultists level their swords at the two of them.

“Any sudden moves, and they die,” Kouadoi says. “Even catching us by surprise, taking out nine First Children is no mean feat. You must be one of the Seven Shadows.”

Nine corpses lie scattered around them.

“Sorry,” Number 559 replies, “but I’m not one of the Seven.”

“You aren’t?! You must at least be one of the higher-ranked Numbers, then.”

“For the time being, I’m merely Number 559…”

“A member of the rank and file has access to power like *that*…?!” Kouadoi’s eyes go wide with shock. “W-well, no matter. Strong or not, your end is nigh.”

He waves his arm, and three of the black-cloaked Cultists lower their hoods.

Numbers 664’s and 665’s faces contort in despair.

“It can’t be… Three of the Cult’s leaders are here?!”

Number 559’s face contorts as well, but in her case into a smile.

Kouadoi places his sword at the nape of Rose’s neck. “Don’t try anything funny. We have hostages.”

“Do as you will,” Number 559 replies.

“What?”

“That woman is unfit to serve the Shadow Garden.” The density of her magic swells. “It’s executions for the lot of you.”

Rose and her mother are bound and dragged off. The last thing she sees when she turns back is Number 559, surrounded by Cultists.

I sit in a tavern in Fort First’s castle town, drinking my apple juice and listening to the exposition.

After fleeing from Delta, I ended up dashing all the way over the border and sneaking into the Oriana Kingdom.

“War’s broken out. Lord Kouadoi controls the area around Fort First, and many of the residents here have died.”

“Hmm. Hmm. I see.”

I idly murmur every so often to show I’m paying attention. The hostess is a bombshell named Marie. I feel like I’ve seen her before, but I’m probably just imagining things.

From what I hear, 90 percent of the guys in this tavern are trying to get in her pants.

“Things are all kinds of messed up right now. The soldiers are shaking us down for everything we have.”

“Damn, that’s rough,” I offer.

“I’m afraid you picked a bad time to get stuck in Oriana, Cid. I only just opened this tavern myself, and—”

The basic gist of it is that Oriana doesn’t have a king right now, so there are two factions vying for power.

Factional disputes, war… Stuff like this just has a kind of je ne sais quoi to it. These kinds of scenarios always have an opening or two for an eminence in shadow to burst onto the scene and strut his stuff.

“I’m sure it’ll all end up fine, though,” Marie says hopefully.

“Yeah, for sure.”

“We can’t give up, that’s all. As long as we keep hanging in there, we’ll figure out how to get through this.”

“For sure, yeah.”

Marie’s eyes gleam as she gazes off into the distance. Except there isn’t any distance to gaze off into. Just the tavern’s dingy door.

Then, the door swings open.

A trio of the worst-mannered soldiers imaginable struts in.

“Hey lady, hand over your profits!”

As a man with a chariot once said, reality is cruel.

“Th-that’s not fair! I just gave you all the money I—”

“Shaddup! If you don’t give us cash, you’ll have to pay us with your body!”

“Y-you can’t—”

“Hey!”

A brave young man plants himself squarely in front of the tyrannical soldiers.

You guessed it—it’s yours truly!

At first, I was thinking that the most normie thing to do would be to cower to the side like all the other patrons, but nah. This one calls for a classic.

“L-l-leave Marie alone!”

It’s that setup where the power of love inspires a boy to take on a group of soldiers—and fails miserably!

“Ack!”

A single punch sends me flying, and blood streams from my nose as I pull off a perfect rotation and a half in the air and land squarely on my face.

Heh. A beautiful rendition of “background character getting his shit kicked in.”

“Cid!” Marie cries.

The soldier sneers at her. “Heh-heh. You’re up next.”

“H-here, you can have the money! Just take it!”

Marie scoops up her earnings and hands them over to the soldiers.

“Ha, shoulda just done that from the— Hey, there’s barely anything here!”

“Th-that’s everything I have. Restocking’s been hard lately…”

“You think I’m some chump?!”

The soldier grabs Marie by the collar.

“I’ll let you off this time. Next time, though, we might not be so generous.”

He and his soldier buddies look her up and down like she’s a piece of meat, then leave the tavern.

“Cid, are you okay?”

Marie leans down next to me and lays my head on her lap.

“Ow, ow… Sorry, Marie…”

“That was so reckless!”

“Sorry…they took all your money…”

“It’s fine.” She strokes my head and smiles.

“You seem calm about all this.”

“I used to live in the Lawless City. You get used to these sorts of things.”

I love the Lawless City. I think of it as my home away from home.

“I worked there as a prostitute for a long time. Violence like this was just a fact of life there, and I came *this* close to giving up more times than I can count. But I never did. And because of that, I was there when *he* showed up and saved me.”

Her eyes practically glitter.

“That’s why I refuse to give up. I have this feeling that if I keep fighting, I’ll meet *him* again someday…”

“Cool, cool. Well, I gotta get going.”

“Thank you for stepping in like that, Cid. It made me really happy.”

Marie sees me off with a smile.

Three soldiers stroll down the chilly nighttime road.

“Ha-ha, what a pushover. And what’s a pretty thing like her doing in a backwater town like this?”

Their sack of gold jingles as they walk.

“Hell if I know, man. I hear the plan is to kill all the villagers to make sure none of ’em talk, though.”

“Something about an important ruin nearby, yeah. Heh-heh, might as well enjoy ourselves before we put the poor bastards down.”

Their breath escapes from their mouths in white puffs as they chat.

When they step into an alley, they find a boy there.

“Heya,” he says with a grin.

He’s got black hair, black eyes, and looks as average as can be.

“Hey, you’re that kid from earlier.”

“Who? Oh yeah, that pathetic pip-squeak who went down in a single punch.”

“Ha-ha, let’s kill the little shit.”

The soldiers draw their swords without hesitating so much as a second.

However, the boy isn’t there anymore.

“Where’d he go?!”

“The hell?! He’s gone!”

“Ah! Behind us!”

Sure enough, the boy is behind them.

He’s standing there as though nothing happened.

“Going straight for blood? You guys’d fit right in at the Lawless City.” He nods. “I love it.”

“How the hell’d you get over there, kid?!”

“There’s something off about this guy…”

“C’mon, guys, get your shit together!”

One of the soldiers swings his sword in a wide arc.

But the boy isn’t there.

“H-he’s gone again!”

They hear the boy’s voice again, though they’re not sure where from. “Makes things real simple.”

“Where’d he—? Glourgh!”

The boy is behind them again. He’s holding the heart of one of the soldiers in his hand.

Blood splatters atop the snow on the ground.

“H-how?! How’d he rip your heart out with his bare hands?!”

“It doesn’t make sense! Earlier, he went down in a single—”

The boy flows seamlessly from one motion to the next.

After tossing aside the dripping heart, he makes his way behind the fleeing soldier and thrusts his arm right through the man’s chest.

“Gahhh! H-help…”

He squeezes down and crushes the second heart.

A flower of blood blossoms on the ground.

“L-look, I’m sorry, okay! I’m sorry I punched you!”

The boy turns his bloodstained hand toward the final soldier.

“In the Lawless City, might makes right.”

“E-eek! Someone, save m—”

He pierces straight through him.

Blood spills onto the alleyway yet again.

“And that makes *me* right.”

Moonlight streams down, illuminating the three corpses with holes in their chests.

“A fortress and some ruins, huh? I like the sound of that.”

The boy discards the final heart and picks the bag of gold up off the ground.

Then, he turns and looks at the fortress off in the distance.

“Y-you’re a monster…,” Kouadoi mutters.

Number 664 can’t help but agree with the assessment.

She’s slumped against one of the forest’s trees, and Number 665 is collapsed by her feet.

The two of them are fresh out of mana. They’re in no state to fight.

Yet even so, there are corpses piled all around them.

There are easily a hundred bodies in total.

Number 559 stands at the center of the grim carnage, covered in blood from head to toe.

She’s been fighting ever since Rose got dragged off. Not only did she put down the three Cult leaders among the robed figures, she also butchered the reinforcements the Cult sent from the fortress.

Nothing can stop Number 559 as she races through the forest. By now, the battle has lasted three full days and nights.

However, that isn’t to say that 559 has emerged unscathed.

Her back has been sliced, her gut has been rent, and her left arm is completely gone from the elbow down. Her right hand still holds her ebony blade, but it dangles powerlessly by her side.

It’s a surprise she’s still standing.

Even now, blood is still gushing from her stump of a left arm.

She doesn’t have the mana left to stanch the bleeding.

“L-looks like your well’s finally run dry,” Kouadoi says, his voice trembling. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you?”

He walks over to her and sends her flying with a kick to the side.

“Agh…!”

She crumples to the ground with an uncharacteristically frail scream.

Kouadoi plants his foot on her neck.

“Perhaps I’ll just crush your throat here and now.”

He gradually presses down harder and harder.

“No, that would be too quick a death for the likes of you. D-do you have any idea how many people we lost because of you?”

A twitchy smile spreads across his face as he squeezes Number 559’s neck.

“We didn’t lose them for nothing, though, so that’s something. We got our hands on Rose Oriana. Duke Perv will be delighted.”

He pulls out a letter and examines it with obvious satisfaction.

“Where to start, where to start? Your good arm? Your legs? Your eyes, maybe?”

He runs his sword across Number 559’s body, leaving shallow wounds in its wake. Without mana running through it, her slime bodysuit offers her nothing in the way of protection.

Number 664 and Number 665 are helpless to do anything but watch.

“What’s with that look?” A puzzled expression comes over Kouadoi’s face as he gazes down at Number 559.

She’s smiling.

The smile is radiant and beautiful.

“You’re here to save me again…”

Tears spill from her eyes.

“God, you’re creepy. Let’s see if one fewer arm can fix that.”

Kouadoi starts bringing down his sword. Emphasis on “starts.”

“Aaaargh!”

Instead of finishing his strike, however, he crumples to the ground with a scream. Everything from his ankle down has been sliced to ribbons.

“B-but how…?”

Number 559 calmly rises to her feet.

She’s holding something in her right hand.

It’s what’s left of Kouadoi’s foot.

“Y-you were supposed to be out of mana… How is this possible…?”

At some point, the area around Number 559 has become full of swirling bluish-purple magic.

It’s so dense it causes the air itself to tremble, and Number 559’s wounds are closing before Kouadoi’s eyes.

Next, the magic gathers at her severed left arm.

It condenses even further, glowing all the while.

Then…

“This is the power *he* possesses.”

Number 559’s left arm is as good as new.

Kouadoi turns and flees. “I thought the Seven Shadows were supposed to be the only monsters in the Shadow Garden… But you’re just as bad!”

Even with his foot torn to shreds, he’s still worthy of the title “the Gale.”

He moves faster than the eye can see, perceptible only as a gust of wind.

“How foolish,” Number 559 murmurs. “You’ve stepped right into his range.”

Blood sprays through the air like flower petals.

Minced chunks of Kouadoi roll across the ground. His final expression is one of naked shock.

The sound of black longboots rings out.

Clop. Clop.

“It’s been too long…”

Number 559 kneels, her face flushed with joy.

A man in a jet-black longcoat strides out from the darkness. Streaks of blood shine ominously on his ebony sword.

"…Master Shadow."

Number 664 hurriedly kneels as well.

Nobody is at Fort First when I go to check it out, but I sense people using magic in the forest right beside it. When I get there, I spot a familiar-looking girl with strawberry blond hair who looks like she's in a bit of trouble.

If I remember correctly, her name is Victoria.

I met her last year when I was on one of my cross-country strolls. She had the possession, so I cured her, then left her with Alpha.

She was so timid she wouldn't hurt a fly back then, so I'm kinda surprised to find her fighting for her life while totally drenched in blood

I can see she's in pain, so I heal her, but she should still probably take it easier in the future. Then, I slice up the old guy who was bullying her.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"Yes, sir," Victoria replies.

Well, that's good, at least.

It does beg the question, though: What was she doing brawling with all these soldiers?

"What happened here?"

"I made a mistake. The Cult of Diablos has already put their plan into motion."

A mistake, huh?

It must be something she's too embarrassed to tell anyone about. She was probably doing something illegal, and the soldiers caught her. I'm impressed she was able to come up with that cover story about the Cult of Diablos so quickly, though.

Aside from Victoria, I also spot the two girls who were hanging out with Rose the other day.

Neither of them look like they're hurt too badly, but I decide to heal 'em, too, just to be on the safe side.

"Th-thank you so much!"

"Thaaanks."

I like these two. They've got good manners.

"…Master Shadow, I have a report."

Victoria tugs on my coat with a bit of a huffy look on her face.

Man, this takes me back. After I healed her last year, she used to tug on my coat all the time.

"It's about Number 666. The *traitor*."

Who?

Look, I get that Mitsugoshi calls its employees by their ID numbers, but you can't seriously expect me to remember six hundred different people.

"A traitor, you say…?"

The girl who looks like a chairwoman type jumps in to defend the supposed traitor. "N-no! Number 666 isn't a traitor—she was just trying to protect her mother!"

"Huh…"

Ah, I see. This "Number 666" must have betrayed Mitsugoshi. They probably stole corporate secrets about some new product and ran off with them.

I nod in comprehension, and Victoria tugs on my coat in even more of a huff than before.

"Number 666 is unworthy of your grace, my lord. I swear, I'll—"

All of a sudden, a cold gust of wind blows a letter toward us.

"Hmm?"

It piques my interest, so I open it and read it.

"Save the date! Princess Rose Oriana and Duke Perv Asshat are getting married!"

"What…?"

Rose is getting married?

I thought the whole reason she killed her dad at the Bushin Festival was so she could become the new monarch, though.

Plus, this guy she's marrying is her old fiancé, the guy she already dumped. Why go back and marry him *now*?

Something is up.

Don't tell me she gave up on becoming the monarch, did she?

"This is unacceptable."

I shred the letter, down to the particulate level.

The existence of light is what makes darkness so radiant.

If Rose becomes the monarch, my eminence in shadow playacting will become that much cooler.

"Wh-what?!" the chairwoman-y girl cries. "But that's not fair!"

"I expected nothing less of you, my lord!" Victoria crows.

"I refuse to let this stand."

There's no way I'm letting this wedding go through.

They might have their parents' blessings, but they damn well don't have mine.

"I'm coming for you, Rose Oriana."

Come on, Rose! Remember why you stabbed your old man?

It was to become Oriana's monarch, wasn't it?!

"Then I leave taking care of the traitor to you, my lord."

"No… Number 666…"

I'm not totally sure why, but Victoria's eyes are gleaming, and the elf girl duo seems to be overcome with despair. I leave them behind, kicking up snow in my wake as I dash full speed ahead.

…Oh, shoot. I gotta go back and pay for that apple juice first.

Marie’s eyes snap open in the dead of night. It’s quiet and oh-so-very cold.

Her window is slightly ajar. That’s odd; she’s sure she closed it before she turned in for the night.

Her breath hangs white in the air as she gets out of bed. The moment she does, something moves beside her window.

“Wh-who’s there?”

“……”

There’s a person standing there. Moonlight streams into the room.

“What?” She recognizes that black longcoat. “A-are you…?”

The window swings open, and the figure disappears in the blink of an eye.

“Please, hold on a moment!”

Marie rushes over to the window.

However, there’s no one there anymore.

“I wonder if that was him…”

Most people would just assume it was a burglar who got away.

However, Marie has someone she can’t help but look for.

She looks for him when she’s walking around town, or when she’s working. She never stops looking. For some reason, even the boy at her tavern today reminded her of him.

“I’m such a fool…”

Then, when she goes to close the window, she notices a large bag lying on the floor.

“What could this be? Oh my—”

When she opens it and finds the mountain of gold coins piled within, tears begin spilling from her eyes. Marie hugs the bag tightly to her chest. It’s still a little warm.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
as it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Putting the Kibosh on Rose Oriana's Wedding!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Putting the Kibosh on Rose Oriana's Wedding!

I arrive in Oriana's royal capital, a city of art and culture.

It's famed for its uniformly colored buildings with their white walls and scarlet roofs, but at this wintery time of year, the roofs are buried under heavy layers of snow, leaving everything white as far as the eye can see.

The city is normally a bustling tourist destination, but unsurprisingly, there are no tourists to be seen. When people plan their vacations, they tend to avoid places that are on the brink of war.

Even the locals are tense.

Based on what I've heard, Perv's marriage to Rose will give him the right to succeed the throne.

There's no way I'm letting *that* happen.

I gotta go talk Rose out of this.

Step one? Getting into the castle, which is in a state of perpetual high alert.

"All right, gatekeepers, let's see if you can keep up with the speed of sound."

The skies are clear, there's a fair number of pedestrians, and the gatekeepers are standing at attention.

It's finally time for my hard-trained movement tech to shine!

Then, I hear a familiar voice. "Master Sha—er—Cid! What a coincidence!"

"Oh, hey, Epsilon. Fancy meeting you here."

I stop on a dime and turn around. Behind me, I find an attractive elf with hair and eyes the color of a clear spring—Epsilon.

Y'know, now that I think about it, she did mention something about getting invited to the Oriana Kingdom to do a piano recital.

"It's an honor to get to see you. I take it you're here about the you-know-what as well?"

Epsilon turns and looks at the castle.

I assume she's here to play the piano for the wedding. Man, anything sounds badass when you call it "the you-know-what."

I put on the most serious expression I can muster.

"That's right. I'm here for the you-know-what."

Looks like we're both here for the wedding.

“I figured as much,” she replies. “Would you like to accompany me, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I introduce you as my apprentice, I can get you in the front door.”

“Oh-ho.”

That sounds kinda fun, and if it isn’t, I can always slip away later.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

And with that, I enter the castle as the apprentice of “Shiron,” the pianist.

Thanks to Epsilon, I get waved right on into the castle. Once we’re in, I’m immediately captured by its gorgeously artistic decorations.

“They don’t call it a land of art and culture for nothing, huh?”

“It’s often said to be the most beautiful castle in the world,” Epsilon replies.

The two of us walk side by side through high-ceilinged corridors and exchange pleasantries with the people we pass.

“In Oriana, people respect the artistically talented, no matter what race they are or what their social status might otherwise be.”

“I see, I see.”

She leans in close to me, wraps her arm around mine, and whispers in my ear.

“All the praise I receive is thanks to you, my lord. You taught me everything I know.”

By my estimate, about 90 percent of her bosom is composed of slime.

Some things never change.

Day in and day out, Epsilon enhances her body with slime.

She uses it to pad her chest and hips, tighten her waist, and even lengthen her legs. It’s amazing what slime can do in the hands of a talented cosmetic surgeon.

Epsilon looks up at me coyly. “Tee-hee. Something on your mind?”

“Nah, I was just thinking about how you never fail to impress.”

I know full well how much precision and fine magical control it takes for her to maintain her figure like that.

“You’re too kind.” She squeezes my arm in delight, then lowers her voice. “I’m keeping an eye on the target to see what they’ll do.”

“…Good.”

Target? What’s this about a target?

“They haven’t noticed us yet. When the time is right, I’ll—”

All of a sudden, a gaggle of people all dressed to the nines chats us up.

“Goodness me, if it isn’t Ms. Shiron! You’re slated to give a performance at the luncheon today, aren’t you?”

“That’s correct, Duke Perv. It’s my honor to be debuting a new piece today.”

Epsilon returns his greeting in a well-practiced manner. The duke has a bunch of retainers shadowing him.

It’s him. Rose’s despicable fiancé.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Perv says. “I love how avant-garde all your compositions are.”

No duh, they’re avant-garde. They were written by a bunch of musicians who don’t even exist in this world.

“I was hoping Princess Rose would get to hear it, but I see she’s not with us today,” Epsilon notes.

“No, I’m afraid she’s fallen ill. She’s going to be taking it easy until the ceremony.” Perv turns to look at me. “By the way, who’s this?”

“He’s my apprentice,” Epsilon replies.

“You have an apprentice? I can’t believe this is the first I’m hearing of it. Forgive me for asking, but does he have a permit to enter the castle?”

“He’s with me, so I assumed he wouldn’t need one.”

“We recently changed the rules, I’m afraid. There are rumors that an outsider managed to sneak into the castle, so we’ve been tightening security just in case.”

“I suppose I’ll have to send him out to go get a permit, then,” Epsilon says. She shoots me an apologetic look.

I nod. These things happen.

“Oh, there’s no need to go that far. If he plays a piece for us, that will serve just as well. I’m sure everyone is dying to know what the legendary Shiron’s apprentice is capable of.”

Perv is giving me nowhere to run.

Fine by me, man. Time to break out the “background character who’s kinda decent at playing piano” routine.

People flood into the hall when they hear that Shiron has an apprentice.

In the Oriana Kingdom, she’s hailed as the greatest pianist in the world. Her name carries a lot of sway.

When she burst onto the scene a few years ago as a complete unknown, her pieces took the world of music by storm. Their innovative artistry and her polished technical skill became the talk of concert halls everywhere.

It’s said that the world of fine art has two rising stars that shine brighter than all the rest—Natsume for literature, and Shiron for music.

When people hear that Shiron’s taken on an apprentice, it’s hard to blame them for sitting up and paying attention.

In the Oriana Kingdom, talented musicians are a big deal. Even if nothing's official yet, nobles hoping to become their patrons latch on to every rumor and scrap of information.

For Oriana nobles, the renown of the musicians they have working for them plays a huge role in how they're viewed by their peers.

That's why the people looking at the black-haired, dark-eyed boy standing before the piano are so confused.

They have no idea who he is.

If this boy is truly blessed enough with talent for the great Shiron to take him under her wing, surely *someone* must have heard of him.

"I saw them linking arms earlier… He had himself sandwiched right up against that massive rack…"

"That lucky dog. What's Ms. Shiron doing with a skeevy little nobody like him?"

"Look, she's young, and young people make mistakes. That's why it's on us to show her a better path."

There are tons of people who would be all too happy to trick a naive young artist and make bank off their talents.

The gazes resting on Shiron's apprentice are already steeped in animosity.

As the air sits thick with tension, the boy plants his fingers on the keys.

"Moonlight Sonata, huh…?"

Why that piece, though?

Out of all of Shiron's pieces, that one's hardly the most notable or best respected.

And yet…

"It's so beautiful…," someone murmurs.

The music is sharp. Polished.

It's like it's carving away all the dregs of life one by one. The only things that can exist in his music are the things he *lets* exist there.

His audience is so enraptured by his performance, they close their eyes.

And when they do, the moon's light fills the world.

When I finish the performance and rise from my seat, I'm greeted by a thunderous round of applause.

Heh-heh-heh, you see that?

Now, you know the power of a *Moonlight Sonata* specialist. I've practiced that piece in my head so much I could play it in my sleep.

I bow to the audience and make my way back to Epsilon, who's clapping so hard I'm afraid her hands might explode.

"Oh, goodness me! I'm so moved, it feels like the deluge of tears will never cease! There isn't a person in this room who'll ever forget the

moment they got to hear the world-famous *Moonlight Sonata* distilled to its finest form!”

Classic Epsilon. She’s a bona fide master when it comes to wildly over-the-top reactions.

Perv steps in and asks a question I’d rather he didn’t. “That performance was so exquisite it was like I could see the moonbeams stream down from above. I’m sorry I ever doubted you. Might you do me the honor of telling me your name, my young pianist friend?”

“He’s still in training, but I would be more than happy to introduce him to you once he’s ready to go out on his own,” Epsilon replies.

“Oh, but we’re all just *dying* to know who he is.”

Ah, right, the Oriana Kingdom has this patronage system that they’re super into.

“As a student, I really shouldn’t…,” I tell him.

“And there you have it, I’m afraid,” Epsilon says.

“A shame, that.” Perv bows. “Still, the performance was sublime.”

Suddenly, I spot a weird bulge in one of his pockets. It catches my interest, so I casually pull a quick one and yoink it.

It turns out to be a small box.

I peek inside, and hello, hello, hello. My good friend Perv, I do believe this is a ring.

Obviously, it must be his wedding ring.

It’s not like he’s gonna end up needing it, so I’ll do everyone a solid and pawn it so it doesn’t go to waste.

I use Epsilon’s slime boobs as cover while I quietly fish out the ring, but I end up feeling kinda bad for Perv, so I decide to at least return the box to where I found it.

It wasn’t without its hiccups, but I successfully passed myself off as Epsilon’s apprentice. Now, I’m in the castle’s music room.

“Would you two like some tea?”

“Later, perhaps.”

I keep an eye out for an opportunity to slip away as I pretend to help Epsilon with her rehearsal, but the castle’s maids are sticking to us like glue.

I could run so fast they wouldn’t see me leave, but that would be pretty suspicious of me in its own right.

“Master Shiron,” I say, “we’ve come all this way. Would it be all right if I took a look around the castle?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Epsilon replies. “I’d forgotten it was your first time here. Go ahead. It’ll be a good experience for you.”

Thanks to our mediocre ad-lib, I successfully escape—

“I can give you a tour!”

—but one of the maids butts in, and my success turns to failure in a heartbeat.

“I’ll be fine on my own, but thanks.”

“Oh, please, you’re Ms. Shiron’s apprentice. We could never neglect you like that.” The maid’s hair is madder red, and a smile spreads across her face like a flower coming into bloom. She walks over to me. “Please, follow me.”

“You’ll be in good hands. Margaret is a veteran,” another maid offers. “On some days, she’s even entrusted with working in Princess Rose’s room.”

Apparently, little miss madder hair is named Margaret.

Margaret sidles right up next to me. “It’s my honor to serve.”

Eh, this is fine. I can just ditch her midway through the tour by pretending to take a wrong turn.

Plus, I do kinda want to ask her about Rose.

"…All right, lead the way."

"Take care," Epsilon says.

I sense a wave of hostility, and when I turn around, I find her smiling and glaring daggers at Margaret.

"And *this* is the Oriana Castle's famous rose garden."

My guide leads me to a magnificent collection of rose bushes.

Even though it's winter, the garden is warm, and its multichromatic flora is in full bloom.

"There's an artifact installed underground that regulates the garden's temperature."

"Oh, huh."

I usually couldn't care less about flowers, but the contrast between the white snow piled up on the castle and the vivid flowers in here is striking enough that even I'm impressed.

Margaret turns back and looks at me. "A-and might I mention—your performance earlier was heart-stirring!"

"Nah, I'm sure it wasn't all that."

"No, it was! Before long, I'm sure you'll be one of the greatest pianists around! That was the best rendition of *Moonlight Sonata* I've ever heard!"

"Ha-ha-ha. I still have a lot to learn."

"Not at all! Ms. Shiron is being too hard on you!"

"I dunno about that…"

"She is, I'm certain of it! Someone with your talent is wasted on her."

"I *definitely* don't know about that."

"I couldn't help but overhear Earl Parton, and he said that you caught his eye! If you worked as a pianist for an earl, your annual salary would be at least one hundred million *zeni*."

"Wait, a hundred million? And that's every year?"

Margaret nods with a gleeful smile. "Marquis Newwealth had high praise for you as well. Your seventy million–*zeni* salary with him would come out a little lower than the earl's, but the concerts the marquis holds are attended by many of the biggest names in music. If fame is what you're after, you definitely want to go with the marquis!"

"One hundred million *zeni*, you say…"

Honestly, becoming a musician might not be a bad path to take.

I mean, pianist by day, eminence in shadow by night? I do like the sound of that.

The problem is, I'd have to start practicing stuff other than *Moonlight Sonata*.

"A-and there's also, um…my family!"

"Huh?"

"You could come work for my parents! The starting salary is usually only fifty million, but I'm sure I could get Dad to pay you seventy!"

"You'd do that?"

"I would, absolutely! I would move heaven and earth for you. What do you say?"

"Huh?"

Margaret grabs me by the hand and leads me behind a rosebush.

She lowers her voice and whispers in my ear. "Just between you and me, I'm on very good terms with both Earl Parton and Marquis Newwealth, and my family puts a great deal of trust in me as well. If you leave everything to me, I can make things go just the way you like."

"Huuuh?"

Margaret presses my arm against her chest.

These puppies are 0 percent slime.

"What will it be? I recommend my family, of course. There, I could be by your side every step of the way."

She tilts her head and looks up at me coquettishly.

"But what about Master Shiron…?"

"Ms. Shiron is a hog who wants to keep her adorable apprentice all to herself. Just earlier, she was glaring at me like you wouldn't believe."

"Uh-huh…"

"Don't you worry about a thing. Just leave it all to me, and I'll back you up with everything I have. How does that sound?"

So, *this* is how they play things in the Oriana Kingdom.

"By the way, I heard you were Princess Rose's maid?"

I slip gracefully from Margaret's grasp.

I've got no plans to go down the path of the musician just yet.

"What? But…how did you—?"

"Where is she, I wonder?"

Margaret petulantly puffs up her cheeks. "Interested in Princess Rose, are we?"

"Who wouldn't be, with all the rumors flying around?"

"For the record, I despise Rose Oriana."

"Huh."

"I was her personal maid up until she transferred to that academy in Midgar. She was always a little odd, but she was kind, and smart, and loved by all. That's why it stung so badly when she betrayed us."

"What'd she do?"

"She plunged the kingdom into chaos, that's what she did. Nobody acknowledges her as the rightful queen anymore."

"Ah, I see."

“Don’t tell anyone I said that, though.” Margaret gives me another sunny smile. “Now, you wanted to know where her room was?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid…that’s a secret.”

“Figures.”

I knew there was no way she would just up and tell me, but a guy’s gotta try.

“I mean, of course I can’t tell you. But… But, but, but… Maybe, since it’s you…”

Margaret squeezes my hand and looks deeply into my eyes.

She brings her face right up to mine. I can feel her breath as she speaks.

“Princess Rose’s room is on the top floor of that tall spire over there. This can be our little secret.”

She just up and told me.

Sharing a secret with someone is a classic con man trick. If you’re in the market for getting someone’s trust and getting it fast, I highly recommend trying it.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t tell anyone else, okay? You’re the only one who can know. Just you, okay? You know, because you’re so special.”

And trying to make me feel special, too? This girl’s putting on quite the show.

“I-it really would mean a lot to me if you at least came and visited my parents.”

“I will definitely, absolutely consider it.”

“Hey, what’re you two doing back there?!”

I turn in the direction the shout came from and find an angry-looking guard glaring at us.

With all the hand-holding and eye-gazing we’re doing, we probably make for quite the eyesore.

“All right, you little creep, you’re coming with me.”

“H-he’s Ms. Shiron’s apprentice—!” Margaret cries.

“I wasn’t asking you! And you,” the guard says, turning back to me, “get your ass over here already!”

His face is as red as a tomato, and he’s pissed as all hell.

“I think I’d better go with him,” I say to Margaret. “You just wait here, all right?”

“I’m so sorry about this. If he does anything to you, anything at all, you tell me, okay? I hate that man’s guts.”

“You do?”

“I always catch him staring at me. It creeps me out.”

She glares at the man. Her gaze is filled with heartfelt loathing.

“Don’t make me say it again, you!” he roars at me.

“Coming!” I jog over to the guard.

“Over here.”

“You got it, boss.”

The guard drags me behind a nearby building.

“You have any idea who I am? I’m Kevin. The guard.”

As he introduces himself, he grabs me by the collar.

“Nice to meet you, Kevin the guard.”

“You think this is funny? What’re you supposed to be, some sorta musician? Must be nice, huh?”

“I’m sorry.”

Apparently, Kevin is real peeved.

“We’re out here protecting the country, you know. You people call us dark knights ‘barbarians,’ but we’re the ones putting our lives on the line for you. So why is it you guys are always the ones who get the pretty girls waiting on them hand and foot?”

“I’m sorry.”

Sounds like he’s got a lot to get off his chest.

With people like these, the best strategy is to just apologize over and over while you think about something else.

“C’mon, piano boy, gimme your best shot! Let’s see how good your precious music is at taking down a filthy barbarian dark knight!”

“I’m sorry.”

I found out where Rose is, so I really wanna go visit her.

“Ha, what a joke! A musician can’t beat a dark knight, and you know it! The arts aren’t worth *shit*!”

“I’m sorry.”

Margaret can’t see us from here, so now’s my perfect chance to pretend to get lost.

“I don’t ever wanna see you around Margaret again, you hear? Me and her, we’re in love with each other!”

“I’m…sorry?”

“What, you got a problem with that?”

“You’re…in love with each other?”

“You’re damn right we are! She and I pledged a vow!”

“But Margaret said she kept catching you staring at her.”

“Every day, we reaffirm our love by looking at each other from across that flower garden! I gaze at her, and Margaret looks away bashfully! But she’s so into me, she can’t help but snatch glances anyways! Oh, my sweet Margaret… Why, she’s lovelier than the flowers!”

“So, you just look at each other?”

“True love doesn’t need words!”

“Have you *ever* talked to her?”

“I talked to her just now, didn’t I?! I mean, sure, it was for the first time, but you could see how head over heels she was for my manliness!”

“Uhhh…”

“What, you got some sorta problem with that?”

“I was just, uh, blown away by how free and unorthodox your relationship is. I can see that what you two have really is true love.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’. Now, don’t you ever talk to her again! I’ll tell her you ran off, so go on and scram!”

You’re the man, Kevin. Thanks to you, I’m finally free.

“Y-y-yessir! I wish you two all the happiness in the world!”

After letting out an incredibly forgettable yelp, I head off to visit Rose.

Rose sits by the window and looks despondently up at the heavens. It’s almost as if the ash-gray winter sky is a reflection of her own heart.

Rose agreed to marry Perv in exchange for her mother’s safety.

She managed to save her mother. However, she has no idea if she’ll be able to save the kingdom.

The Shadow Garden will probably make a move before long. Although she had her reasons, the fact remains that Rose disobeyed a superior officer. She has little doubt that they’ll brand her as a traitor.

And the Cult of Diablos is going to make a move, too. They’re definitely up to something.

The Oriana Kingdom is about to become a mere stage for those two powerful forces to clash.

However, Rose is under house arrest. She’s helpless to do anything but stare at the ashen sky.

“Cid…”

Whenever she feels like things are too much to bear, she thinks of his face.

Tap.

Someone knocks on her window.

She heads over and looks outside, and when she does—

“It can’t be… Cid…?”

—she sees the very boy she’s been dreaming of.

Her cheeks flush as she stares at the dark-eyed, black-haired youth.

She wonders if she’s dreaming. She was so sure she’d never get a chance to see him again.

“Rose…”

She can feel the heat in his gaze. Even just looking at each other is enough to convey the depths of their passion.

She’s positive that in that moment, he’s thinking the exact same thing she is.

Her heart feels like it’s going to beat out of her chest.

She wants nothing more than to hold him tightly to her and to run away with him.

But she can’t.

“…Get inside already. It’d mean big trouble if anyone spots you.” She forces herself to act cold and detached. “Why? Why come? Why do something so dangerous?”

“I needed to see you. I became a pianist’s apprentice so I could sneak in.”

“You would go that far? For me…?”

She’s on the verge of bursting into tears.

He crossed national borders, won over a famous pianist, and infiltrated the castle—all for her.

She can only imagine how much he must have gone through on his journey.

The sheer amount of work it would’ve taken to get an apprenticeship from a pianist skilled enough to get into the castle is almost unthinkable.

“I wanted to talk to you about the wedding,” he says.

“Th-there’s nothing to talk about…”

She loves him, and that’s why she has to push him away.

The two of them are doomed to never be together. The least she can do is keep him out of harm’s way.

“I mean, it’s not actually happening, is it?”

There’s a pleading look in his eyes. He wants so badly for her to deny that it’s happening.

He wants her to say that he’s right, she isn’t marrying Perv. She’s marrying *him*, instead.

“I-it’s true, all of it. I’m marrying Duke Perv of my own free will.”

Her voice trembles.

Tears finally start streaming from her eyes.

She turns her face and wipes them away before he has a chance to notice.

“No…”

He sounds like he’s just been told the world is ending.

Rose screams internally.

Having to hurt the boy she loves like this cuts her to her core.

“What was it all even for, then?!” he cries.

He’s talking about the fateful day when he and Rose pledged their love to each other. Now, Rose has broken that pledge.

“Please,” she chokes. “Just move on and forget about me…”

The tears won’t stop.

She can’t bear to hurt him any more than she has already.

“No. I refuse to give up.”

“Oh, Cid…”

“What happened to you, Rose?! This country looks down on dark knights, but you didn’t let that stop you. You became one anyways. Nobody supported you or understood you. It must’ve been lonely, but you followed your dreams anyways! You and me, we’re the same.”

“You mean…you went through the same thing?”

“I have a dream that nobody could understand, so I get how you feel better than anyone.”

Rose can tell exactly what that dream of his is. She doesn’t need to hear him say it to know.

The two of them are dreaming of the exact same thing. Cid’s dream is Rose’s, and Rose’s dream is Cid’s.

That dream is for the two of them to be wed in holy matrimony.

Even the mere idea of a low-ranked noble like him marrying an Oriana princess is too ridiculous for words.

However, Rose refuses to make light of his feelings.

Those feelings were born of the love they had for each other.

“I understand your dream, Cid! Even if the world turns its back on you, I’ll always respect it!”

“You might, but society never will. They’ll call me an idiot, or a nutjob, or they’ll tell me to grow up already. The masses don’t look kindly on people like me.”

“Let them say what they like! None of that changes how pure your feelings are!”

“Rose…”

Rose can feel the passion smoldering in his gaze.

True love doesn’t need words. She can tell how he feels just by the way he looks at her.

“You and I, we chose to follow our dreams,” he says. “We didn’t care what obstacles stood in our way or who mocked us. So why’re you giving up on your dream now?!”

Rose’s voice cracks. “I—I’m…I’m not…”

“You stabbed your fiancé and killed your dad, the king. And I’m not gonna ask you why you did that. You know why? Because I believe in you, and I believe that you did it because you were heeding your convictions and following your dreams.”

“Cid…”

“So, I have to know. Why abandon your dream now?”

“I…”

“I mean, you ran your fiancé through, and now you’re marrying him? How is that not giving up on your dream?! You fought so hard for it! So, why? Why give up *now*?!”

“……..”

Rose bites her lip. She has no answer to that.

She knows better than anyone that this isn’t how she wanted her life to play out.

However, what option does she have but to sacrifice herself to keep the people she loves safe?

“Just forget you ever met me!” she cries. “As long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters!”

“I’ll never give up. Not even if it means turning the world against me.”

“I don’t have anything more to say to you. Please, just leave…”

Rose shoves Cid out the window and locks it behind him.

Then, she crumples with her back to the wall and starts sobbing.

Why should two people who love each other as much as they do have to get torn apart like that? Why can’t her dream of marrying him come true?

Rose weeps at how cruel destiny is. At how cruel reality is.

A short while later, there’s a knock on her door.

“Coming.”

She wipes her tears dry and opens it.

Duke Perv comes in.

“I thought I heard voices.”

“A-as you can see, I’m the only one in here.”

“…Hmm.”

Perv pushes her aside and inspects the room.

He looks under the bed, opens her closet, and glances out her window.

“So you are,” he remarks.

Rose breathes a sigh of relief. “That’s why I said it.”

“I can see you’ve been crying. That must be what I heard.”

He caresses Rose’s puffy red eyelids with his finger.

She swats away his hand. “Don’t touch me!”

“Come now, that’s no way to be. We’re about to get married, you know.”

“Only on paper.”

“Know your place!”

He slaps Rose across the cheek.

She glares at him. “……”

“Don’t forget—Queen Reina’s life is in your hands.”

Rose hangs her head and bites her lip. “…Yes, sir.”

“That’s what I like to hear. As long as the marriage goes through, I can guarantee nothing will happen to her.”

He wraps his arm around her shoulders.

Her cheek twitches.

“Now, I hear they finished your dress for the big day. Isn’t that exciting? Let’s go try it on, shall we?”

“…Yes, sir.”

Rose bites down harder on her lip and allows Perv to escort her out of the room.

Then…

“Ah, so that’s what’s going on.”

The room should by all rights have been empty, yet an average-looking boy with black hair and dark eyes stands there all the same.

He helps himself to the room’s tea set, pouring himself a cup before reclining on the sofa.

“Her mom got taken hostage, huh?”

He crosses his legs and begins wolfing down the pastries he finds on the table, in an act of base thievery.

“Well, that makes things nice and simple. Damn, these things are *choice*. Where do they get off, squandering the taxpayers’ hard-earned money on luxury snacks like these?”

After chugging down more tea and stuffing his cheeks full of pastries, he draws the curtain on his elegant little one-man tea party.

With a few nonsensical final words, he leaves the room. “Whew. Don’t you worry, good people of Oriana. I avenged your misspent taxes for you.”

A short while later, a completely innocent guard named Kevin will get suspended from his duties for stealing food.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
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All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Begin Operation: Obstruction!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Begin Operation: Obstruction!

“You know, I think this is the first time you’ve failed a mission.”

Epsilon raises a wineglass to her lovely lips as she gazes down at the Oriana night skyline.

“My deepest apologies.”

Number 559—Victoria—stands beside her.

The two of them are in the Super Royal Suite at the Mitsugoshi Deluxe Hotel right beside their Oriana Kingdom branch store.

The room’s furnishings practically scream classy, and the window has a gorgeous view of the entire royal capital.

A single night there costs a million *zeni* and is restricted solely to nobles, and yet even so, it’s booked solid for the next year.

“I saw your report on Number 666,” Epsilon comments.

“She needs to be dealt with promptly.”

“While I agree that her actions were rash, I think it’s a bit premature to be branding her a traitor.”

“But…”

“Your loyalty is admirable, but you have a tendency of getting overzealous. I plan on having you stand shoulder to shoulder with the Seven Shadows someday. Don’t let me down.”

Number 559 squeezes her fists tight. “…Yes, ma’am.”

“Also, the fault for the operation’s failure doesn’t fall solely on you. I didn’t warn you about Number 666’s mother, and that’s on me.”

“That’s—”

“I never imagined that Queen Reina would be at Fort First. I should never have let those two meet, and for that, I take full responsibility.”

“You don’t—”

“I was never going to lie to her, but I was hoping we could wrap things up without her having to learn the truth.” Epsilon takes a sip of her wine. “I understand Master Shadow has taken point on the matter?”

“That’s correct. He was furious. He said what she did was ‘unacceptable.’”

“Interesting. He made contact with Number 666 earlier today, you know.”

“Our lord works fast.”

“So he does. But he didn’t execute her.”

“He must be after something,” Number 559 surmises. “He might plan on tailing her. Or perhaps he has some even deeper reason…”

“I haven’t the faintest. There are some vistas only Master Shadow can see.” Epsilon shakes her head. The gesture is tinged with sadness.

“His must be a truly lonesome view.”

“Indeed it is. And in spite of that solitude, he fights more nobly than any. That’s what makes him Master Shadow.”

Victoria wipes the tears welling in the corner of her eye. “Master Shadow…”

“Whatever our lord’s plans are for Number 666, we follow his lead. The problem is that ring you saw back in the ruins.”

Number 559 grimaces in chagrin. “We should have retrieved it then and there.”

“That would have been better, yes. You made the right call, though. That ring was the key.”

“So, the Cult’s really after the Black Rose?”

“It certainly looks that way,” Epsilon replies.

“In that case, we need to get the ring back quickly.”

“We have to play it smart. If we corner them, they’re liable to use the key, and if the legends are true, that would mean the Oriana Kingdom will —”

“Is the Black Rose really that dangerous?”

“There’s an old story about how Oriana was on the verge of destruction. That is, until they used the Black Rose to kill the hundred thousand Velgaltan soldiers besieging its capital in a single night. That tale is no mere children’s story.”

“The power that would require…”

“I’ve gotten in touch with Alpha, and she’s gathering more personnel. Once we’re ready, we’ll—”

Suddenly, the two of them are interrupted.

The door swings open, revealing Cid wearing a bathrobe.

“Whew, that was an awesome soak. Nothing beats a private open-air bath.”

He plops himself down on the room’s posh sofa, looking as pleased as punch.

“We’ll finish this discussion later,” Epsilon says quietly. Then, she goes and scooches right next to Cid. “Would you like something to drink?” she asks him.

“A coffee milk would totally hit the spot, yeah.”

Epsilon goes and gets a bottle from the refrigerator artifact. “What about something to eat with it? I can call up room service.”

“I could go for a light snack, sure. Ooh, like that roast beef we had for dinner. That stuff was great.”

“Ah, the Mitsugoshi five-star beef? If I may, it goes quite nicely in a sandwich.”

“Cool, I’ll get a roast beef sandwich, then. And also a regular roast beef. Oh, and a fruit platter on the side, too.”

“We’ll get them sent up at once.”

Number 559 rings a bell and conveys the order to an employee.

Cid takes the milk bottle from Epsilon and takes a big swig. “Whew. Coffee milk after a warm bath, doesn’t get better than this.”

“Here, let me massage your shoulders,” Epsilon offers.

“Wow, that brings me back. Back when I lived with my folks, you used to make me tea every day while I lazed about.”

“It was nice, being together all the time back then.”

“This is paradise.” Cid closes his eyes in bliss. “And you’re sure I don’t have to pay for any of this?”

“Oh, of course not.”

“Not even the room service?”

“No, no, the room service is free as well.”

“Thanks, Epsilon. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I—I… Y-y-you’re too kind.”

Epsilon hangs her head. She’s bright red from the ears down.

Then, Number 559 joins in on the massage-giving. “Let me get your feet.”

Cid relaxes with the laziest expression imaginable on his face. However, Epsilon and Number 559 know full well that this isn’t the real him.

The average Joe they’re looking at is nothing more than a role he plays. Shadow, the ever-dignified lord and master of the Shadow Garden, is the person he is deep down inside.

By habitually pretending to be a hapless background character, he’s able to move about as he pleases without anyone taking notice or suspecting a thing.

However, it also means he always has to be “on,” never getting so much as a moment’s rest.

Epsilon wants to give him a brief moment of tranquility, even if she knows it can’t last long. She nestles as close to him as she can.

“About the you-know-what…”

Despite Epsilon’s hopes, though, Cid starts talking about work. A twinge of sadness runs through her as she presses her slime against the back of his head.

“…it looks like I’ll be able to settle things pretty quickly.”

“Goodness me. It hasn’t even been a full day.”

“My infiltration and investigation went off without a hitch. The only thing left to do is nip the problem at its source, and the mission will be complete.”

“I take it you settled things with *her*, then?”

“Yeah. When I get involved, I get results.”

Epsilon blushes a little, spellbound by the confidence in his voice. “You never fail to impress, Master Shadow. In just one day, you’ve already figured out everything and found a path to the solution…”

“Of course. The feats I’m capable of strike fear into even the gods.”

“E-even the gods?!” Epsilon cries. “I had no idea you had reached such a level! Consider me in awe, my lord!”

“Heh. I can knock a god out with just a single finger.”

“A-a single finger?! That’s incredible!”

“Heh-heh-heh. If I get a chance, I’ll show you some time.”

Epsilon’s and Number 559’s eyes sparkle.

That’s their Master Shadow—doing the impossible and making it look easy!

The cool morning sunlight washes over me as I make for Oriana Castle.

Last night, I got to stay the night at a swanky suite for free. Can I get a hell yeah?

The breakfast this morning was buffet-style, which was excellent, and between that, the quick soak I took, the sauna, and the massage, I can’t think of a better way to start the day.

I’d say that it’s nice to have friends with connections, but from what I hear, Mitsugoshi is thinking of opening a line of beauty salons catering to the wealthy. They’re probably just using me as a guinea pig.

Plus, they based practically all of this stuff off the stories I told them about cosmetic surgery and cosmetology. Now, they’re planning on making money hand over fist off my knowledge.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’ve got my happiness, and you can’t buy that with money.”

I’m not sour about it. No way. Not me.

Now, Epsilon’s got work this afternoon, so it looks like I’m flying solo.

Thanks to my investigation yesterday, I discovered that Rose is only going along with the wedding because her mom’s been taken hostage. All I have to do is save Queen Reina to snap Rose out of her funk, kill Perv, and seize the throne.

It’s the perfect solution. Sometimes, life throws you an easy one.

“First things first, let’s figure out where Queen Reina actually is…”

I can picture it now—the eminence in shadow swoops in, conducts a flawless rescue op from the shadows, and fuels the birth of a legendary monarch.

“Heh-heh-heh…”

My status as Epsilon’s apprentice lets me stroll right on into the castle, and loads of people greet me as I head to the music room. My cover is that I’m heading there to tune the piano.

I gotta say, though, this place is seriously hardcore about their art and culture stuff. I had no idea I was gonna pull so much attention as a mere fake apprentice.

“Mr. Apprentice!”

Margaret is in front of the music room. When she spots me, she jogs over and gets right up in my personal space.

“Are you okay?! After yesterday, I mean.”

“Yeah, I’m aces.”

“I was so worried for you, I couldn’t sleep last night. That rotten guard…”

“Ha-ha, it’s all good.”

“You’re not hurt, are you? I swear, if that miserable wretch harmed your fingers, I’ll make sure he never wakes up again…”

“I’m fine, really.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Your fingers are more valuable than a guard’s life, after all.”

“For sure, for sure.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about, though. The horrible guard isn’t here anymore.”

“Huh?”

“He was caught stealing food, so he got reassigned.” She grins. “I was the one who reported him!”

“Man, what kind of asshole goes and steals food?”

“All those times he gave me those creepy looks, he must’ve been looking for an opportunity to do his crimes. That’s how I knew it was him.”

“Wait, so you didn’t actually catch him in the act?”

“I didn’t, but…I knew he was the one who did it, so I got everyone together so we could get our stories straight first.”

“Oh, clever.”

“I mean, the brute ate up all the tea and pastries in Princess Rose’s room. Can you believe it?”

“Damn, that’s messed up.”

Hmm?

Now that she mentions it, I feel like I might’ve done the exact same thing yesterday, but…nah, probably just a coincidence.

“I did it all for you, Mr. Apprentice. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Aw, thanks.”

“By the way…did you and Ms. Shiron not come together today?”

Thump.

Margaret shuts the music room’s door behind us.

“Nope.”

“In that case, what would you say to a meeting with Earl Parton?”

She closes in on me.

“I dunno…”

I deftly retreat backward. My footwork is impeccable.

“Why not?! And why is it I can’t reach you?! I—I—I can get you an appointment with Marquis Newwealth, too, you know!”

“I’m still not a proper pianist yet.”

“Y-you’re a fantastic pianist! Tch, you’re so fast! And it isn’t just your speed, your movements are so smooth and efficient!”

“Nah, I’m really not all that.”

“Ms. Shiron is just using you! You have all that talent, and she’s perfectly happy letting it all go to waste. Tch, you’re so far away…but a good maid never gives up!”

Despite being out of breath, Margaret refuses to throw in the towel.

“You, uh—”

“I’m sorry, what was that about someone wasting someone’s talent?”

The music room door swings open. Epsilon is standing behind it.

Margaret’s smile stiffens for a brief moment, but she quickly recovers and curtsies to Epsilon.

“Why hello, Ms. Shiron. I thought you weren’t planning on arriving until this afternoon.”

“I wasn’t, but then I got this niggling worry that someone might be bothering my adorable little apprentice and getting in the way of his work.”

“In that case, ma’am, I’m glad to let you know that your concerns were unfounded.”

“Oh, I think they were quite founded.”

The two of them cross their arms in sync.

The music room is seized by a peculiar silence.

“Would you mind?” Epsilon eventually says. “My apprentice and I need to get ready for work.”

“In that case, I’ll brew you some tea.”

“Are you really going to make me spell it out for you? Do you have a field of flowers growing where your brain should be or something?”

“If you’re in the market for flowers, might I interest you in the royal flower garden?”

“Listen here, you flower-brained child: You’re a nuisance. Get lost.”

“Eep, she’s scary! Save me, Mr. Apprentice!”

Margaret scuttles over behind me—

“Now you see who Ms. Shiron *really* is.”

—and whispers furtively in my ear.

“I can hear you, you know,” Epsilon replies.

“Remember, Mr. Apprentice, I’m on your side. For now, though, you’ll have to excuse me.”

With that, Margaret—recognizing that the tides have turned against her—beats a tactical retreat.

Epsilon sighs. “Her country’s on the verge of war, and she’s acting like she doesn’t have a care in the world.”

“Yeah, the people here hardly even seem tense.”

“This nation’s aristocrats despise violence and adore the arts, just as they have throughout Oriana’s history. And all because of the Black Rose…”

“A black rose, hmm? I’d love to see one of those.”

The royal garden had all sorts of roses, but no black ones.

"*Gasp!* You plan on actually witnessing the Black Rose?!"

"Of course."

I mean, I came all this way to the Oriana Kingdom. If they've got cool rare black roses, I definitely want to check 'em out.

For some reason, Epsilon starts muttering some stuff I can't make heads or tails of. "But… The total destruction… And it's so dangerous… On the other hand, this is Master Shadow we're talking about…"

"What's wrong, Epsilon?"

"No, it's nothing. If that is what you would choose, Master Shadow…"

"Yeah, obviously I'm gonna choose to see the black roses."

She drops to a kneel. "As… As you wish, my lord!"

That's Epsilon for you. She always makes a huge deal out of everything, even something as simple as going to look at a couple of flowers.

"By the way, do you know where Queen Reina's room is?"

"The queen? Ah, so that's your angle." She smiles meaningfully.

"Yup, that's my angle."

"For the queen's room, you'll want to go…"

After she tells me where Queen Reina's room is, I slip out of the music room. On my way there, I keep an eye out for any black roses.

I don't end up spotting any black roses, but I find the queen's room pretty quickly.

Oddly, it doesn't look like anyone's guarding it. I peek in the window and spot Queen Reina and Duke Perv.

"Huh?"

It looks like they're talking, but something feels off.

"Oh, Perv… Are you sure we can't make our love public yet?"

"Just a little longer, honey. We have to finish the wedding and get what we need out of Rose first."

"Sometimes, it feels like you actually *want* to marry her…"

"No, no, honey. You're the only one I have eyes for."

"And you promise you'll kill Rose right away so we can get married?"

"Of course, honey."

Perv and the queen exchange a passionate kiss.

OH MY GOD.

"Honey, it's time. Work calls."

"It's always the same with you. You say that, and then you go off to see the girl. Still, I only have to put up with it for a little longer, so I'll be patient for you. You'll come and visit me tonight, though, right?"

"Of course, honey. I'll see you then."

Queen Reina watches Perv leave the room with a great deal of reluctance.

“Well, that’s not good,” I mutter to myself as I quietly step away from the window.

Perv and Queen Reina are in cahoots.

In other words, saving the queen won’t accomplish squat.

What to do, what to do…? Wait, that’s it!

“I just have to tell Rose!”

When she finds out they’ve been pulling one over on her, flames of rage will stir up within her and rouse her to action. I’m sure of it.

The plan is as follows.

Acting as Shadow, I’ll carry Rose away tonight and take her to watch Perv and Reina’s little rendezvous.

“I can even say something cool like, ‘It’s time for you to see the truth.’”

I’ll get to be “the eminence in shadow who knows everything.”

When Rose finds out her mother betrayed her, her rage will rouse her into assuming her position as monarch.

“Then, I can say something badass like, ‘Awaken, Monarch of Demise.’ Heh-heh-heh… A perfect plan if ever I heard one.”

Now, all I have to do is withdraw for the time being and wait for nightfall.

“Oh hey, it’s Epsilon.”

As I kill time by searching the castle for black roses, I spot Epsilon. That’s odd; I assumed she would still be in the music room.

For whatever reason, it looks like she’s concealing her presence and sneaking around.

I conceal my presence as well and creep up behind her as she picks a door’s lock.

“…There, open.”

The moment the lock pops open, I call out to her. “Stop right there.”

Epsilon immediately braces for battle, but upon seeing my face, she breathes a sigh of relief. “I-impressive as always, Master Shadow… I couldn’t sense you at all. You were practically one with the air itself, like you had become the embodiment of all creation. Your technique awes me, my lord.”

Never change, Epsilon. Never change.

“What were you doing?” I ask.

“I, er…” She awkwardly averts her gaze. I bet she was trying to loot the place. “I can’t find the key anywhere. I assumed Duke Perv would have it, but my investigation revealed that all he had was an empty case. The problem is, I have no idea where he hid it…”

She couldn’t find the key, so she decided to pick the lock?

I guess there’s a certain kind of perverse logic to that.

“We need to at least find out where it is, or we won’t be able to deal with any problems that might arise.”

“There’s no need to search for the key anymore, is there?”

“There isn’t? Are you sure?!” she asks. She looks shocked.

“Obviously.”

Why would you need the key when you’ve already picked the lock?

“You never fail to amaze, Master Shadow. I hadn’t realized things had already progressed that far… How far out would you have to have seen to be able to prepare this? Truly, your eyes must hold the spark of divinity. No, even that would fail to account for it… You are by far the noblest man in all of creation, my lord, and being able to serve you makes me the happiest person in all the world!”

I made the most basic observation possible, and you managed to spin it into all that? If anyone never fails to amaze, Epsilon, it’s you.

“So then, the preparations are all complete?” she asks.

“The preparations…? Of course.”

My preparations for tonight are flawless. I’m gonna show Rose the cold, hard truth.

“In that case, I’m going to head back and get ready for work.”

“You do that.”

With that, I leave Epsilon and the royal castle behind and kick up my feet at the hotel until nightfall.

Rose waits nervously for the madder-haired maid to brew her tea.

When she takes a sip, it fills her mouth with a delightful floral flavor.

“This is wonderful. Thank you, Margaret.”

“……”

Margaret doesn’t reply.

She gets through her work dispassionately, ignoring Rose all the while.

Rose stares sadly at her back. “Excuse me…Margaret?”

“If that’s all you need me for, I’m going to take my leave.”

“Um…”

As Rose fumbles over her words, Margaret exits the room.

The door clicks shut, and Rose lets out a sigh.

She and Margaret grew up together. She loves the way Margaret’s smile looks like a flower coming into bloom.

Now, though, Margaret doesn’t smile at her anymore.

But that’s fine.

Rose has decided that’s she’s going to save her mother, no matter what it takes. If nothing else, she owes it to her father.

The cold night wind blows through her lonely room.

“I could have sworn I closed the window…”

Could it be? Is he here again?

Rose's pulse quickens. She knows she needs to stop seeing him, but she can't help but hope anyway.

She calls out his name as she walks to the window. "Cid…?"

Suddenly, all the lights in the room go out, and a fierce presence rises up to replace them and announce the advent of someone cut from a different cloth.

She was wrong. It isn't him.

An ebony longcoat flutters in the moonlight.

"Shadow… M-Master Shadow," Rose murmurs blankly.

That man is like a god to the Shadow Garden. Sweat beads on her hands from the tension.

"Have you…come to kill me?"

He's here to put down the traitor, no doubt.

She never imagined that he would actually be the one to do it himself.

"I'm sorry…"

Rose owes the Shadow Garden a great debt. It saved her from countless crises and lifted her up when she needed it most.

She grieves over the fact that, inadvertent as it was, she's repaid their goodwill with treachery.

However, Shadow says something wholly unexpected.

"It's time for you to see the truth."

His voice booms deep as he presents his hand to Rose.

"What truth?"

"Grab hold."

The gleaming red eyes beneath his mask are fixed straight on her.

She's unable to refuse.

Rose goes with Shadow, and he takes her to one of the castle's balconies. The nighttime wind is chilly against her skin.

"Wait, this is…"

It's her mother Queen Reina's bedroom.

"The truth lies beyond."

"Again, what truth?"

She doesn't understand what he means.

Apprehension and anticipation well up inside her. Her eyeballs practically shake as she peers into the room.

"What…?"

What she sees inside shocks her to her core.

Illuminated by the dim light from the fireplace, Duke Perv and Queen Reina are locked in an embrace.

Rose stares at them in a petrified daze.

"But…why?"

Queen Reina isn't resisting Duke Perv. To the contrary, she's accepting him with open arms.

Rose can just barely make out their voices through the window.

"It won't be long until the kingdom is ours," the queen says.

"And it's all thanks to you, honey."

"All that work I put into drugging my idiot husband is finally going to pay off. He did make for a good puppet, though, I'll give him that."

"It's a shame he got killed like that. We had so many plans for him…"

"See, this is why I told you we should've killed Rose from the get-go. Think of all the extra work we had to do once she became his successor—"

Rose can't bear to listen anymore.

She shrinks away from the window, though she can still see them passionately making out through the curtains.

"This isn't happening…"

She trembles from head to toe, and her vision distorts. The whole world seems to be spinning.

"It's the truth."

"No, it can't be… It isn't… My mother would never…"

She totters unsteadily across the balcony and leans against its guardrail.

"Accept what you know to be true."

Shadow's voice sounds like it's coming from a million miles away.

"No… No, it isn't…"

"The time has come."

She can feel her consciousness slipping away.

"Remember what you saw. Remember what you must take."

"Oh…"

"The sword of rebellion must be—"

Amid the haze in her mind, all the pieces click into place. Now, she understands why her mother was going along with the Cult's orders back then…and why Number 559 was trying to kill her.

The moment it all becomes clear to her, she collapses like a rag doll.

Shadow looks down at her in surprise as her honey-blond hair splays out across the balcony floor.

"Wait…you passed out? Right when things were getting good?"

Rose doesn't reply.

"Hey, what's up? You okay?"

He shakes her shoulders. Still nothing.

"The traitor is right there, though! This is your chance to kill her! I'll even help!"

The wind blows, cold and lifeless.

Shadow tilts his head, looks up at the sky, and lets out a long, cloudy-white sigh. "Maaan… My perfect plan…"

He picks Rose up and, with a dejected slump of his shoulders, leaps down from the balcony.

Did she go wrong somewhere?

Or was everything all messed up from the very beginning?

Images flash back through Rose's mind. She sees the dead faces of her father and the Oriana soldiers.

What is it she's even been fighting for?

What was it they even died for?

And as for her father… Why? Just, why?

When Rose saw her mother kissing Perv, she felt like her entire life had been a lie.

When she comes to, she finds herself in her own bed, staring up at the ceiling. Her face is covered with dried tears; fresh ones flow over them and wet her cheeks once more.

"I want to go back…"

She thinks of the days she spent at the Midgar Academy for Dark Knights.

If only she could return to those days of blissful ignorance—those days with him.

"Cid…"

What was it she was even trying to accomplish?

What is it she's been working toward?

Ever since she killed her father, she feels like her gears have been slowly sliding out of alignment.

It was for the kingdom. It was for her father. For her mother. For herself. All of that is true, and yet it all feels like lies, too.

She doesn't know what's true anymore. She doesn't know anything. She wishes it were all just over.

But then, right as the despair starts sinking in…

…she hears a beautiful piano melody.

"Moonlight Sonata…"

It's a piece she'll never forget. She once heard Shadow himself play it underground in Midgar.

This time, however, the person playing *Moonlight Sonata* on the piano by the window is someone else.

It's an unremarkable, dark-haired boy.

"Cid…?"

Rose wonders if she's dreaming again.

She staggers over to him and reaches out to try and touch him.

Her hand brushes his cheek. The music stops.

It's not a dream. It's not an illusion. He's really there.

"Cid…do you want to run away together?"

He'll take her away from all of this. He'll take her to some far corner of the world where nobody knows who she is, and the two of them can get married and start a happy family there.

Rose has killed her father. She's been betrayed by her mother. She's betrayed the Shadow Garden herself. She's been forsaken by her people.

But him, he's the one person who'll never abandon her. No matter what happens, he'll always stay by her side…or so she believes.

As long as she has him, she'll be fine.

"Cid…"

Her fingertips skim his lips, and his dark eyes meet hers.

They're as black as the darkest night.

The moonlight shines down on him as he softly speaks. "I really like this piece. It makes the world make sense."

"How so…?"

She doesn't understand what he's trying to tell her.

"I see the world in two categories. Things that are important, and things that aren't."

"…Why?"

"Because I have a dream that I can't achieve if I don't. There's only so many hours in a day, only so much effort a person can give. That's why I pour all of mine into what's important, and I cast everything else aside."

Now, Rose gets it.

He's saying that he's sacrificed everything, all for her.

He crossed the border for her, he poured his sweat and blood into learning the piano for her, and he snuck into the castle for her.

His actions speak volumes.

However, he can't come out and say it.

He doesn't want to put that kind of pressure on Rose.

Tears well up in Rose's eyes at how pure his love is.

"But it turns out, that's easier said than done. There's too much static. The world is full of it, and it covers up those important things. It's so easy for us to lose sight of what matters."

There's a strange depth to his eyes. Rose feels almost as though she's being sucked in.

"The way I see it, the world is a little too bright. It shows you all these things, but it shows you too many of them, and it makes you lose sight of what's truly precious—just like you're losing sight right now."

"I…"

Rose killed her precious father. Her precious mother stabbed her in the back.

What was it that really *was* precious?

Rose doesn't know anymore.

"It's so alarmingly easy for us to forget what our purposes in life are. So, y'know…" He looks up at the moon hanging in the night sky. "…This world is best under the moonlight. It forces us to strain our eyes, and because of

that, we're able to keep our sights fixed on what's important. Under the moonlight, all we have to look at is what's precious to us."

His fingers shift, and he continues playing *Moonlight Sonata*.

The moon's gentle light shines down upon the world, and the beautiful notes fill Rose's ears.

From there, they reverberate through her body and sink deep into her heart.

"What is it you see, in this moonlit world?"

With those final words, he vanishes.

There's nobody at the piano bench. It's like he was nothing more than an illusion cast by the moon's light.

"Cid…?"

But he was no illusion.

A small ring sits on the bench where he just was. It shines in the moonlight.

It's a wedding ring.

"Cid!"

Rose squeezes the ring tightly against her chest.

It's an artifact with an artistic design, and she can sense a bit of magic coming from it. She can barely even imagine how expensive it must have been. She can tell he put a lot of thought into choosing it.

He was trying to use it as a desperate attempt to convey his true, irreplaceable love…

"What…?"

She looks up at the moon.

"What *is* it I see…?"

Its light feels impossibly kind.

"I lost the ring!" I lament as I soak in the open-air bath.

Talk about an upset.

I stuck it in my pocket and forgot about it, and before I knew it, it was gone. I shoulda just pawned it as soon as I could. I wonder how much I could've gotten for it.

"Eh, oh well."

Easy come, easy go.

I shake off the loss and look up at the night sky. Snow is starting to fall.

"Man, what a great bath."

I did what I could to get through to Rose.

Nothing anyone said could've stopped me from working to become an eminence in shadow, so if she's got the heart of a lion, I'm sure she'll get back on her feet and raise the standard of rebellion.

The rest is up to her.

But on the other hand, if she *doesn't* get back on her feet…

"I'd better crash the wedding."

There's no two ways about it.

I can be the eminence in shadow who bursts into the wedding, shoots off a couple profound quotes, and whisks the princess away.

"I trust the Mitsugoshi Deluxe Hotel's special Sky Bath is to your liking?"

Epsilon comes in. She got me an exclusive reservation for the bath, of course.

"The snow adds an elegant touch."

I wouldn't know elegance from a hole in the ground, but it sounds cool to say.

"Shall I wash your back for you?"

"I already washed it, but thanks."

"Ah. What a shame."

Epsilon sits down next to me with a *sploosh*.

Seeing her fair skin sends a shiver down my spine.

"No…way."

She's developed her slime body to the point where it looks indistinguishable from actual skin.

I can't help but take another look.

"Tee-hee-hee… That's a little embarrassing, you know."

"Ah, sorry."

As a fellow magic aficionado, though, I can't let her achievement go unpraised.

The sheer degree of fine magical control, the molding, the secondary texture adjustments… It's amazing how far she's pushed her work.

"Incredible stuff, Epsilon."

"Huh?"

I've said all that needs saying.

There are some things that simply don't need to be put into words.

"The snow is beautiful, isn't it?" she remarks.

"For sure."

The two of us sit side by side and take in the snowscape.

I decide to make some small talk about my day. "I got caught by surprise today."

"Oh my. You're not hurt, I hope?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"I should have known. Even if we searched the whole world over, we would never find anyone who stood a chance against you, my lord."

"If she finds the will to stand back up, I expect her to raise the standard of rebellion."

"You already know how everything will play out?!"

"The showdown will take place at the wedding."

I conjure a blade of magic and slice the moon’s reflection on the water’s surface in twain.

A spray of water shoots up from the impact, causing the moonlight to reflect every whichway.

“There…the lion will wake.”

I smile meaningfully. I’m sure of it. She’ll awaken, and she’ll kill that Perv guy dead.

Heh. That’ll be a fun shock for the guests.

“The showdown will be at the wedding, you say? I’ll make the necessary preparations!”

Epsilon hurries out of the bath.

What preparations does she mean? Like, making sure she has some popcorn ready?

“I should probably get out soon, too, huh?”

It isn’t long before the wedding day arrives.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
as it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Crashing the Ceremony!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Crashing the Ceremony!

Duke Perv stands on the second floor and gazes down at the ceremonial hall.

"Our defensive perimeter is *airtight*, I assume?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, make sure it stays that way. The Shadow Garden could be planning something."

The Cult agent disguised as a guard bows to Perv, then leaves.

Word of the Shadow Garden's raid on Fort First has reached Perv's ears.

The Cult took every precaution so as not to be detected, and yet they'd been a hairbreadth away from having the Ring of Succession stolen away from them anyway.

Once again, the Shadow Garden is being a thorn in Perv's side.

Shadow was the one who ruined his scheme back at the Bushin Festival, too, and that's forced Perv's plan to take quite a detour. The Cult is finally starting to get serious about wanting to crush the Shadow Garden, but Perv has seen Shadow's prowess firsthand, and he fears that the Cult is still underestimating the threat he poses.

As further proof of that, the Cult has yet to succeed in pinning down the Shadow Garden's base of operations.

In fact, their intel on the Shadow Garden is lacking on all fronts. In Perv's eyes, that's gross negligence on their part.

Even now, the Cult still believes its grip on the world is as firm as ever.

"Still, I have the Ring of Succession. Once the right to succeed the throne is mine, my plan will be complete. And as for the Shadow Garden, we can drag the intel we need out of Rose Oriana."

He's run into all sorts of unexpected problems recently.

Using Queen Reina to turn King Oriana into a puppet was going splendidly, but somehow, the king realized the danger he was in and tampered with the Ring of Succession to transfer control of it over to his daughter, Rose. Now, the only way for Perv to gain dominion over the Ring is to marry the girl.

"All's well that ends well, though. Once this is over, I'll finally be able to join the Rounds…"

Perv has it on good authority that the twelfth seat will be his if everything goes smoothly in Oriana. He has the backing of Sir Mordred, the ninth member of the Rounds, to thank for that.

In exchange, Sir Mordred will expect his support in the Cult's upcoming internal power struggle.

Perv's track record will be the weakest in the Rounds, so he'll have to play along for the time being. Once he becomes more powerful, though, he should have little trouble currying favor with whatever faction is currently in control.

That Cult is no monolith, and that fact gives rise to all sorts of opportunities for advancement.

"As long as I have the Ring, I'll be fine…"

He retrieves a small box from his pocket. He's been careful not to let it leave his person for even a moment because of the ring inside.

It's no mere wedding ring, of course. It's the Ring of Succession.

Confident of his victory, he smiles as he opens the box.

"…Huh?"

His smile vanishes in the blink of an eye.

The box is empty.

The ring is nowhere to be seen.

"Wait, what? No, no, no."

He checks under the lid, then his pockets, then the floor. The color drains from his face.

"It's gone…"

The cold, hard truth hits him.

"I lost it…"

It was in there when he got the box. He made sure to check that.

Since then, the box has never left his person. There was never an opportunity for it to go missing.

"H-how, then…?"

Queen Reina was the only one who knew where it was, but Perv has a hard time imagining that she stole it. She doesn't have a motive.

In that case, is this the Shadow Garden's work?

Even if he assumes a man with Shadow's talents could have picked his pocket, it doesn't make sense. If he had an opportunity like that, he would've just killed Perv.

In that case, it must have been an inside job—the work of a faction opposing Sir Mordred.

Stealing the ring and leaving the box had set a cruel trap for him.

Their wicked motives are as plain as day. They want to ruin Perv.

"I got played!"

The power struggle must already be underway.

At this rate, there's no way he'll be promoted to the Rounds. Instead, Sir Mordred is going to kill him.

"Shit…"

A veritable waterfall of sweat begins cascading down his forehead.

He needs to search for the ring, but he can't use any Cult personnel to do it. Their loyalties lie with Sir Mordred, and if Sir Mordred finds out what happened, Perv is done for.

If his blunder gets exposed, he'll definitely, positively, certainly get killed.

"I-I'll have to look for it on my own…"

Fortunately, he still has some time left before he actually needs the ring.

If he comes up with some bullshit excuse, he can probably buy himself three days before the handoff. That's what he'll do.

Then, right as Perv manages to start pulling himself together—

"Perv."

—Sir Mordred's voice echoes directly in his head.

"Ahhh!"

He's here.

Sir Mordred has come, and he's *here*.

"Rejoice. I've pulled all the necessary strings. Once this is over, the twelfth seat is yours."

"I-it's an honor…"

"I'm expecting great things from you. Don't let me down."

"I—I would never dream of it…"

Perv heads to the ceremony in a daze. His mind is completely blank.

Rose ascends the exterior staircase leading up to the royal castle.

She looks utterly gorgeous in her pure-white wedding dress, captivating everyone who lays eyes on her.

Throngs of Oriana citizens are gathered at the bottom of the stairs to watch the proceedings. Rose hears both cheers and boos, but neither capture her attention.

At the top of the stairs, her groom, Duke Perv, is waiting for her. He seems vaguely out of sorts, but given how composed she's feeling, Rose suspects she's just imagining things.

When she reaches the top, they're going to exchange their wedding vows.

However, Rose's expression is bright and unclouded.

It was snowing last night, but the morning's arrival put an end to that. Warm sunlight streams down from the clear blue sky.

She's done second-guessing herself.

She has no more regrets.

She's not afraid anymore.

She knows what it is she needs to do.

When she reaches the top of the stairs, she takes her spot beside Perv.

Slightly confused at how ashen his face looks, she waits for the moment to come.

After a sonorous hymn and a Bible reading from the priest, it's time for the vows.

"Do you pledge to have each other, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, to love and to cherish?"

Perv is the first to speak. "I do."

All eyes turn to Rose.

A quiet wind blows, sending her honey-blond hair asway. As it does, she smiles—

"I do not."

—and speaks.

A stir runs through the crowd.

"Wh-what the hell do you mean?!" Perv shouts. His eyes are wide in shock.

Rose turns to face her people. Her honey-yellow eyes gleam, like she's just figured out what it is that's precious to her.

"I killed the king."

Her voice travels easily through the winter air.

All the chatter stops. The crowd is dead silent.

"I won't make excuses. I acknowledge it all. All the sin, all the mistakes, everything. But there's one final thing I want to make very clear."

Her wedding dress whirls as she points.

"You, Duke Perv, are guilty."

What runs through the crowd this time is less of a stir and more of a storm.

"Of what? What crime would you accuse me of?!"

"You've violated the public trust. You manipulated your king, sullied your queen, and plotted to overthrow the government. I accuse you of high treason."

"Lies and slander! What proof do you have of any of that?!"

"None whatsoever," Rose says unashamedly. She has no intention of dancing around the matter or of obfuscating it.

Perv lowers his voice. "Okay, enough screwing around. I've got a hostage, remember?" he growls threateningly. "Take back what you just said, say your vows like a good little girl, and I'm willing to overlook what you just did."

Rose beams. Her smile is stunning enough to enchant any who witness it. “I can’t do that. I promised myself I would see my love through, no matter the cost.”

With that, Rose produces a ring from her pocket.

It’s the wedding ring her beloved gave to her.

She blushes a little—

“H-h-how do you have that?!”

—and slides it onto her left ring finger.

The moment she does, it emits a blast of light.

The light is so blinding, it paints everything white and blots out the tumultuous crowd down in the plaza.

“Wh—”

When the light dies down, an image of Oriana’s late king hangs projected in the sky.

“Fa…ther…?”

“What…the hell…?!”

Everyone present looks up in disbelief.

“By the time you all hear this declaration, I may no longer be with you.”

The king begins talking as though he’s still alive.

However, his form is translucent, and the sky behind him is visible through his body.

“Day after day, I can feel my mind wither away. It won’t be long before I lose myself entirely and end up getting used as a puppet. Before that happens, though, I want to tell you the truth.”

The image is giving King Oriana’s testament.

“My decline is being caused by some sort of drug. Someone is poisoning me. They could be mixing it into my water, they could be slipping it into my food; I don’t know. They might be administering it some other way altogether. I ask my wife to secretly swap out my meals, but it keeps happening. But while I don’t know the method…I do know the culprit. And it’s Duke Perv.”

Every pair of eyes is on Perv.

“S-such nonsense…”

“He’s being backed by a powerful organization, and they’re trying to seize control of the Oriana Kingdom. I’m afraid I can’t divulge the organization’s name. Still, I’m sure many of you must have found it odd. How could Perv, the mere adopted son of Duke Asshat, have reached such a distinguished position in Oriana in such a brief time frame?”

From there, King Oriana begins exposing one after another of Perv’s schemes.

He details all the dirty tricks Perv used, lays out proof of his wrongdoings, and lists the people Perv used as drugged puppets or paid off to turn traitor.

Once he’s finished, the king smiles gently.

“I plan on fighting to the bitter end to protect this nation, but even if I fall, there’s nothing for you to fear. When that happens, I leave Oriana’s future in the hands of my daughter, who I trust and adore more than any other. No matter what happens, I want you all to believe in her. She will be the one to lead our nation to greatness.”

Then, he turns and looks at Rose.

It should just be an image. The man is long since dead.

However, the king’s gaze is fixed on Rose all the same. It’s almost as though his soul is inhabiting the image, like a tiny part of him still dwells in the ring.

The king calls her by name.

“Rose, I entrust the kingdom’s future to you.”

All of a sudden, Rose remembers everything.

Those are the exact same words as the final ones he said when she stabbed him through the chest.

Her father loved her up to his dying breath.

“Father…”

She can feel a heat rising up inside her.

Large tears spill from her eyes, and the image of King Oriana fades into the sky.

“This is absurd! Who would believe that drivel?!” Perv roars.

Rose shoots her piercing honey-yellow gaze straight at him. “As Oriana’s princess—I condemn you.”

“Shut up, you! Guards, get over here! Seize this girl at once!”

Not a single person obeys his order.

The guards simply stare at him coldly.

“Wh-what is this? Why aren’t they doing anything?!” Perv scans his surroundings, spreading his arms wide as he shouts. “You’re abandoning me?! Throwing me to the wolves?! After all I’ve done for the organization?!”

It’s almost like he’s directing his plea at someone the rest of them can’t see.

“It’s over.”

Rose flicks her arm as elegantly as if she were dancing.

When she does, a section of her wedding dress reverts to white slime, then molds itself into a rapier.

She brandishes it.

“I hope you’ve made your peace, Duke Perv.”

“You really think you can take me? Do you have any idea who I am?!”

With a look of pure rage, Perv draws his sword in turn.

A shrill noise rings out as the two blades meet.

“This isn’t possible…” As the two of them stand with their blades locked, Perv grimaces. “You’re my equal?! When did you become so strong?!”

“Oh, we’re hardly equals.”

The white rapier’s first move sweeps Perv’s sword to the side.

“Rgh…”

Its second is a slash that leaves white afterimages in its wake and flips Perv's sword upward.

"How are you so fast…?!"

And its third…

Its third traces a gleaming ivory arc through the air as it runs Perv through.

"This can't…be…"

Perv stares blankly at the rapier stabbing him in the chest.

"There was hesitation in your sword work," Rose says. "You'll never cut anyone like that."

She wrenches her blade free, and Perv crumples powerlessly to his knees.

"I was supposed…to join the Rounds… I can't…fall…here…"

Then, he finds a white rapier being pressed against his throat.

"It's no use… If you kill me…*he* will just—"

"What do you mean, 'he'?"

Perv looks up at her with bloodshot eyes. "Heh-heh… His name…is Mor — GYAAAH!"

Out of nowhere, Perv's eyes bulge as wide as they can possibly go.

He coughs up a huge blood clot.

Rose shrinks back. "What…? Why?"

As she does, Perv's severed head rolls off his body.

It tumbles over to the stairs, then begins plopping its way down. First one step, then two, then three…

Queen Reina rushes over from the guest seats and scoops up Perv's head. "No, NOOOOOO! Rose, you monster! How could you do this to him?!"

Rose shakes her head "No, that wasn't me…"

Whoever killed Perv, it wasn't her.

Somehow, whoever did it was able to lop his head clean off with nobody even noticing them do it.

"But who could've—?"

Rose looks around.

One man at the ceremony has a different air about him than all the others.

The man has fiery-red hair. He leisurely ascends the stairs.

He was in an area that everyone was paying attention to, yet nobody paid him any notice.

"I thought I could get a *little* more use out of him…"

It's only when he speaks that the people around him even realize he's there.

The guards draw their swords and move to surround him. "Wh-who the hell are you?!"

The moment they do, however, their heads fall to the ground. The crowd screams as blood gushes from the guards' necks.

"Stay back!" Rose cries. "He's dangerous!"

She wasn’t even able to see his attack. A single glance is enough for her to tell how outstanding his talents are.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“They call me Mordred.”

“Mordred…”

Rose recognizes the name. That’s the ninth seat of the Knights of Rounds—Sir Mordred, the Knight Beyond Men.

Rose cautiously puts some distance between herself and him. “And what business do you have here, Sir Mordred?”

“Just a little cleanup. You know what they say—no foe is deadlier than an incompetent ally.”

As Mordred speaks, he walks over to Perv’s corpse. Queen Reina is clinging to the body like her life depends on it.

“Out of the way.”

“Mother, get out of—!”

Rose is too late.

Mordred cuts Queen Reina down, then sets both her corpse and Perv’s corpse ablaze.

The flames are an eerily bloody shade of red.

“Mother…”

Rose levels her white rapier at Mordred.

However, Mordred shows no signs of wanting to fight her. He just smiles coldly.

“The key’s been passed down.”

“What key?”

“That means the door is free to open.”

“What are you talking about…?”

All of a sudden, ominous mana begins flowing freely. It’s so heavy and thick it makes it difficult to breathe.

“It’s not without its risks, but I sent it on a rampage.”

Their surroundings are inexplicably dark.

At first, Rose assumes the sun is hiding behind a cloud.

However, that isn’t it. Darkness is spreading across the heavens directly.

“What’s going on…?”

“The Black Rose slew a hundred thousand Velgaltan troops in a single night…but at the same time, it obliterated the royal capital.”

The inky blackness gnaws away at the sky itself.

Something vaguely resembling flower petals whirls about its center.

“This is the legend’s true form—the Black Rose of the Oriana Kingdom.”

The darkness swells.

A seemingly endless horde of black, newborn lumps cascades down from the Black Rose.

They’re hideous beasts the likes of which nobody present has ever seen.

“The Cult has a rule: No witnesses. The banquet of slaughter begins now.”

“E-everyone, run!”

At Rose’s scream, the overawed spectators begin fleeing.

However, the obsidian beasts rush at them with a terrible zeal.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

Rose hears a familiar-sounding shriek. She looks over and sees her maid.

“Margaret!”

Margaret has fallen over, and one of the beasts is gnashing at her.

Rose cleaves forward with her white rapier, positioning herself squarely between Margaret and the creature.

Her rapier meets the beast’s claws, and its black blood splatters across the ground.

“Margaret, are you okay?”

She hugs Margaret tightly. The maid is trembling.

“R-Rose…my lady…”

“Thank goodness you’re all right. You need to get inside to safety, and fast.”

Margaret rises to her feet. “A-at once!”

She turns to run, then stops and turns back.

“I—I just want to say… I misjudged you, Princess Rose. A-and…I’m sorry!”

“Don’t give it another thought. Now, go!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Rose smiles gently as she sees Margaret off.

However, the Black Rose is still spitting out those Stygian beasts.

It takes a minimum of ten soldiers to subdue just a single one of them.

“We won’t be able to hold out like this…”

Rose kills as many nearby beasts as she can, but it does little to diminish their forces. If anything, their ranks continue to swell.

The creatures surge after the fleeing crowd like a wave. The next moment, however, they all get sliced to ribbons.

“So—the Shadow Garden makes their move.”

Mordred casts a piercing gaze out into the shadows. That’s where the young women who slew the beasts under the cover of darkness are.

They move in perfect harmony, running circles around the fell creatures as they hunt them with the speed and ferocity of a gale-force wind.

“Number 664, Number 665…”

Rose knows two of them well. They glance at her for a brief moment and smile at her.

Number 559 is there, too—as are Beta and Epsilon of the Seven Shadows.

Beta turns toward Rose and calls over to her. “You did good work.”

“Beta…?”

Beta smiles like the two Numbers did, then turns back forward. Epsilon stands by her side.

“Sir Mordred,” Beta says. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

The ninth Knight of Rounds and the Seven Shadows duo square off.

“The Seven Shadows…”

“Now, before we kill you, we’d like to check our answers on a few things.”

Mordred scoffs. “Shut up, small-timers. I don’t have time to waste entertaining the likes of you.”

With that, he pulls something from his pocket and hurls it into the Black Rose.

“What did you just do…?”

“I called him.”

“Called who?”

A tremendous amount of mana begins gathering at the Black Rose.

Then, it sprays out like black lightning.

And when it does, a massive arm appears in the inky darkness.

“Ragnarok, grand ruler of the Fourth Realm.”

Flame gushes from the arm like blood as the entirety of its owner slowly comes into view.

Its gigantic ebony frame is as taut as steel, and sharp claws extend from the ends of its long, thick arms.

The whole thing is wreathed in fire, and it spreads its massive wings against the jet-black sky.

“Wh-what…? What is that thing…? It’s like some sort of demon…” Rose is unable to hide her horrified trembling. It’s the first time in her life she’s ever felt so overwhelmed.

“Is that…what I think it is?” Epsilon asks.

“It is indeed,” Beta replies.

With a flap of its massive wings, Ragnarok makes its way across the blackened sky and heads straight for Beta and Epsilon.

“Pulverize them, Ragnarok.”

But then, a flash of bluish-purple light shatters the darkness to smithereens.

“Wh—?”

Magical aftershocks ripple across the capital.

They’re followed by a scream of pain. A jet of scalding-hot blood sprays up from one of Ragnarok’s wings.

The amputated wing wafts down like a leaf from a tree, and Ragnarok’s massive frame begins plummeting downward.

A man in a jet-black longcoat swoops out of the darkness.

He flicks his ebony blade to shake off the smoldering blood still clinging to it.

“A bat on fire? That’s not something you see every day.”

“Master Shadow!”

“Shadow… Even catching him by surprise, I’m impressed you could cut a wing off Ragnarok.”

Mordred sounds downright astonished.

However, Shadow only gives him a single glance before turning away and walking off.

Clop. Clop.

Shadow's boots click, and his jet-black longcoat flutters.

"You'll need far more than that to lay him low, though. All you've done is anger—"

"Shut up, small-timer," Shadow snaps, cutting him off.

"_____"

Mordred's face contorts with rage.

Shadow's gaze is fixed far off in the distance.

He's looking at the now-one-winged Ragnarok. The monster landed well outside the capital.

Shadow brings his bluish-purple magic back in. It begins glowing ever brighter as it envelops his legs.

Then, he leaps up into the blackened sky.

The bluish-purple trail he leaves behind fades after him with tremendous speed. Magic and fire clash in the distance, causing shock waves that reach all the way to the capital.

"The man has too much faith in his own strength. What a fool. Ragnarok will eviscerate him."

"We'll see who the fool is soon enough," Beta says coldly.

"Know your place, child. No man can stand against Ragnarok."

"What a sorry man you are. You have no idea just what Master Shadow is capable of."

"I *said*, know your *place*."

Rose gulps as she watches Mordred's mana wax fuller and fuller.

Mordred is so powerful it's downright inhuman. However, the Seven Shadows are plenty inhuman in their own right.

"Let's play, you and I," Beta says. "We'll show just what *we're* capable of."

She draws her blade.

The battle between the two Seven Shadows members and the Knight Beyond Men begins quietly.

They move in steps. No, half steps.

Slowly but surely, Beta and Epsilon inch toward their foe.

Then, in unison, they come to a halt.

The position at which they freeze has the three of them—Beta, Epsilon, and Mordred—positioned like points on a triangle. The way they stopped, it was like they could see something directly in front of them.

The night wind blows through their hair.

The corner of Mordred's lip curls upward.

Then, in the blink of an eye—

"_____"

—Beta and Epsilon leap backward as one.

Something unseen cleaves through the air and leaves a vivid red wound across Epsilon's cheek. Rose watches in shock as a bead of blood streams down from the cut.

Mordred was able to wound the legendary Faithful.

That, more than anything, speaks volumes about how inhuman his talents are.

Beta fixes her gaze on Mordred. "I see… So, this is the power of the Knight Beyond Men."

"That it is," he replies. "If you had taken even a single step farther, your head and your neck would have parted for good. I suppose I should compliment you for having dodged it."

"Don't bother. You're a petty stage magician, nothing more."

"A *what*…?" Mordred growls.

"I have to say, this is the last place I expected to run into the magic sword of legend. You're using the Invisible Blade, the long-lost elven artifact sword that's invisible to the eye."

Mordred responds to Beta's glare with silence.

That tells her everything she needs to know.

"Save your breath, I know I'm right. Your blade smells of elves. It reminds us of our failing homeland, and it fills our ears with the lament of the smith who poured their very life force into it."

"Now you're just making things up."

"That sword belongs in the elven capital. I don't know how you got your hands on it, but it's time for you to return it."

"Hmph. And you're going to make me?"

"Oh, most certainly…"

Beta grins, and Epsilon finishes her sentence for her.

"…Because you're not the only one with invisible weapons at their disposal."

"What?"

As Mordred regards them quizzically, it comes.

Something whizzes through the darkness and carves up his hair.

A few tufts flutter about.

"Wait, did you just…throw your magic…?"

Mordred is shocked.

Throwing magic is no easy feat.

When a person sends magic outside their body, they lose control of it almost immediately as it begins to disperse. Not only would manipulating it from that point require a tremendous amount of mana and technical proficiency, but mastering that technique to the level of being able to use it in live combat would require an unbelievable amount of effort.

Yet despite Epsilon's tender age, she's done just that.

Her attack has such speed.

Such intensity.

That level of magic control is unthinkable.

If it wasn’t, every dark knight in the world would have cast aside their swords ages ago in favor of throwing their magic.

“It can’t be…”

Epsilon proudly clicks her high heels and throws out her chest. “That was a warning shot. The only reason your head is still on is because I want it that way. Now, either tell us what we want, or we’ll hurt you until you tell us anyways. The choice is yours.”

Mordred grinds his molars in loathing. “You really think you have me beat…?”

“Don’t forget about me, by the way. I hope you don’t mind a little two-on-one.”

Beta comes and stands beside Epsilon, throwing out her chest as well, like it’s a competition.

“Man, this fantasy world doesn’t mess around. Even their bats are ginormous,” I remark as I face off against the massive flaming bat.

My original plan, for a variety of reasons, was to watch the birth of Rose the Monarch from off in the distance, but then there was this huge monster outbreak.

No biggie, though. I get what’s going on.

This is the forces of darkness working to hinder the monarch. When the redheaded dude summoned the bat, it was to stop her from coming into her own.

No matter the era, people will always have power struggles.

“Y’know, you look kinda badass. You’ve got the whole ‘demon king’ vibe down pat,” I say to the bat, who’s still pretty pissed I chopped its wing off.

It responds with a growl.

Apparently, it’s gonna take more than a single severed wing to bring this bad boy down. Its wound has already finished regenerating. Plus, the thing’s one hell of a tank, and the amount of mana it’s working with is unbelievable.

If I try to fight this thing fair and square, there’s a good chance it’ll trounce me.

Good thing I’m not planning on fighting fair, huh?

“Shall we begin?”

As an eminence in shadow, it’s my duty to take it down in a single stylish blow, then say a few ominous words before vanishing myself.

To that end, I do a little hop backward.

A moment later, the bat’s pointed claws eviscerate the spot where I was just standing.

Next, I hop to the side.

The bat brings its meaty arm down, leaving a crater at the impact site.

That one blow could've taken out a dozen houses, easy. And on top of that, it would've set everything around them on fire.

This thing's like a walking natural disaster.

No matter how tempered their mana is, a human would have to charge up if they wanted to call forth power on that scale.

That's the crazy thing about beasts—their ability to wield power like that at the drop of a hat.

At the end of the day, though, a beast is still just a beast.

I breathe in and focus all my efforts on dodging the bat's attacks.

Fighting a beast fair and square is a sucker's game.

As the bat continues its fiery onslaught, I continue gathering data.

I want to know what this guy is capable of, and what it isn't.

What it's willing to do, and what it won't.

It's important that I understand what it will do in any given situation, as well as how it will react to each action I take.

The thing is, beasts are simple creatures. Put them in the same situation over and over, and they'll approach it the same way each and every time.

However, they also get wary once they take a hit.

There are exceptions to those rules, of course, but when they come up, it's always the product of random happenstance rather than something the beasts chose through careful consideration.

I make sure to keep an eye out for those rare exceptions as I continue dodging all over the place.

If I try to slash at this magic spammer, all it'll do is wear me out.

Instead, I can just take the camping route and wait it out. That way, I don't have to put myself in any danger.

With each massive *wham*, the bat smashes another hole in the beautiful earth.

Looks like kicking it out of the capital was the right call.

Now, then.

I've basically figured out all of our flamy bat friend's attack patterns, so I figure it's probably high time to make my move.

Then, out of the blue, its pointed tail sweeps in front of my eyes and fills my entire vision with fire.

"Welp, found the exception."

The moment I realize things are off, I hurl myself backward.

Not a moment later, I sense a massive amount of magic approaching, and a heavy impact sinks into my flesh.

OP magic, OP power… I swear, beasts have it all.

I focus all my magic on defense.

As I do, I twist my body to soften the blow.

I've practiced this maneuver a thousand times over. I could pull it off in my sleep.

A moment later, I get blasted away. If I were a baseball, I'd be an outta-the-park homer if ever there was one.

I stick the landing like a proper eminence in shadow, then check for damage.

My bones and organs all seem fine.

“But my bangs…are singed.”

In the blink of an eye, I slice away the frizzly bits and make it like nothing ever happened.

“To think you would be able to inflict such a blow on me.”

There’s a good chance nobody’s listening, but I shoot off a line to set the mood anyway and stare up at the sky.

Up above, the burning bat soars around in the darkness with its freshly regenerated wing and sucks in air.

Is it gonna do a breath attack?

I could try tanking it, but the royal capital is right behind me, so that’s probably a no-go.

Besides, I’ve finished all my prep work.

Based on the results of my investigation, it would appear that the fire bat has a habit of completely ignoring finer, more delicate magic.

From there, the rest is simple.

“The skies are under my dominion. Engrave that knowledge in your flesh…within my birdcage of darkness.”

I take the finely woven threads of magic I’ve been laying out across the dark sky and pour mana into all of them at once.

The burning bat lets out an earsplitting roar.

The threads have no mercy, and they’re slicing it to ribbons.

A torrent of blood gushes from the bat’s body as it plummets.

With a great tremor, it crashes into the ground.

Still, it’s hard to overstate just how much mana it’s got.

No matter how much magic I pour into those tiny threads, there’s no way they could ever deal it a serious blow.

It rises back up from amid the cloud of dust, and its eyes gleam with an incandescent rage. Its wounds will be all better soon.

But the thing is, beasts get wary once they take a hit.

I start casting out threads of finely spun magic again.

This time, the bat treats them with respect and takes care to dodge them.

At this point, it isn’t willing to ignore any magic, no matter how minute. At the same time, though, it doesn’t actually understand what it is that got it into its earlier predicament.

That makes manipulating it a breeze.

It’s done for.

It still wants to fight, but it doesn’t have the brains to get through its current predicament. The battle is all but over.

“I grant you the auspicious title of ‘Dumber than Delta.’”

From here, the rest is academic, so I start trying to figure out what the shadowbrokeriest way to finish it off would be.

“Okay, so I start by lopping off the arm…”

“How…are you this strong…?”

Rose watches in shock as Mordred’s face twists in humiliation.

She knew that the Seven Shadows were on a different level, but still, she never imagined that the gulf between them and Mordred would be quite so vast.

“Me, bested by a pair of little girls?”

Mordred rests on one knee as he hacks up blood. Beta looks down at him coldly. “Don’t tell me you think you lost because you were outnumbered, do you?”

“Rgh…”

He glares at her. A trail of blood runs down from the corner of his lip.

“It would have ended the exact same way. If you can’t see that, then I pity you, and if you can but you’re lying to yourself, then you’re a fool. Which is it, I wonder?”

“Shut up, you… If you’re so confident, why not fight me alone from the start?”

“We had a numbers advantage. Why wouldn’t I use it?”

Rose isn’t surprised. From watching the battle, she suspects that Beta doesn’t find combat all that interesting. Very little of her personality comes through in her fighting style.

She doesn’t have any tics, nor is she at all inventive. She simply takes what she was taught and carries it out with strict fidelity.

The Shadow Garden has taken the fighting style Shadow invented and formalized it so they can teach it to their members. Out of all of them, Beta the Steadfast is the one who’s replicated it with the highest degree of accuracy.

On a fundamental level, she just doesn’t care about fighting all that much.

That’s why she’s satisfied with what she’s capable of and doesn’t aspire to anything more. Her true interests probably lie more on the literary side of things.

“This isn’t over yet… I still have Ragnarok.”

“I suppose you do.”

Heh.

Beside Beta, Epsilon lets out a giggle. “If that’s what you’re holding out hope for, then we’d be more than happy to wait until Master Shadow has finished his battle.”

“…What’s your angle?”

“I have two reasons. The first is our absolute faith that Master Shadow will prevail.”

This time, it's Mordred's turn to laugh. His voice rings with scorn. "You're a fool."

"As for the second, it's like we said earlier. We want to check our answers on a few things. On the Black Rose, on the magical beasts…and on Diablos."

"And why would I play along?"

"If you're that sure Ragnarok will win, what's the harm?"

Beta's and Mordred's gazes meet. Each of them is trying to suss out the other.

Eventually, Beta levels her ebony blade at Mordred—

"Fine. It's not as though knowing will save you from Ragnarok's flames."

—and after a brief silence, he begins talking.

"Did you know that there are countless other worlds beyond our own?"

"I take it you aren't talking about outer space," Beta replies.

"I'm talking about entire other dimensions. We call them Realms."

"Realms…"

"There are scores of them. Worlds frozen pole to pole in ice, worlds so poisonous that no life can take root there, worlds of searing flame, empty worlds devoid of light and color…and worlds populated by powerful magical beasts."

"So, worlds with magical beasts in them are Realms?"

"No, all worlds other than ours are Realms."

Beta nods, urging him to continue.

"Now, all these Realms orbit around a single point. Even our world is no exception."

"What's at the center of it all?" Epsilon asks.

Mordred shoots her a look and shakes his head. "Who knows? Perhaps it's God."

"That is to say, you can't even observe it?"

"Not even a little. But whatever's at the center is the least of our worries. The problem is all these worlds orbiting around. Round and round they spin as the years go by."

Mordred draws circles in the air with two of his fingers, then starts bringing them closer together.

"Until, *bang*."

His finger circles overlap.

"Every so often, the worlds collide. The impact sends rifts across the worlds, and for a moment, two different worlds become linked. When that happens, each exerts influence on the other."

"They become linked and influence each other…," Beta says, parroting his words to better chew them over.

"Let me give you an example. We performed a geological survey, and what it told us was that ten million years ago, there was no magic in our world. It just didn't exist. The question is, where did it come from?"

"You're saying it was from one of these Realms?"

“It certainly seems that way. It’s not like it could have just popped into existence one day from nothing. It came from another world. When we came into contact with a Realm, it poured a colossal amount of mana our way. And when that happened, it had drastic effects on our ecosystem.”

“So, that’s why the dragons went into decline?”

Mordred raises an eyebrow and nods. “Exactly. Long ago, this world was ruled by dragons. Not the dragons we have today—an older type called ancient wyrms. But at one point, the wyrms went into decline. And that point was exactly ten million years ago. They failed to adapt to the magic that flowed in from the Realm, and those that succeeded—us humans—prospered where the dragons once thrived.”

The two members of the Seven Shadows nod along with Mordred’s explanation.

They probably already had a general idea about all that. Besides, what they said was that they wanted to check their answers.

For Rose, however, all of this is new information. It takes everything she has just to keep up with the conversation.

“But magic isn’t the only thing Realms can bring.”

“You mean the magical beasts.”

Mordred nods. “There are two theories for where they come from. The first is the explanation commonly accepted by scholars, where magical beasts are simply animals from our world that evolved in response to magic. However, that theory has a few holes. Biologically speaking, magical beasts bear no resemblance to any animal we know of. And furthermore, could something as simple as affinity for magic truly transform normal animals into magical beasts?”

“It’s certainly a stretch.”

“Magical beasts operate on a fundamentally different logic than we do. They defy every rule of nature. And the magical beasts might not be the only thing alien to this world. Humanity itself might originally hail from a Realm, as well.”

“Wait…people?”

Shock crosses Beta’s expression for the first time in the whole exchange. Mordred smiles smugly. “There are still a lot of mysteries revolving around us. Out of all the species in this world, we stand head and shoulders above all the others in terms of our intellect and our prosperity. It’s a quality unique to people, and people alone. It begs the question—are we even native to this world at all?”

Nobody has an answer to that.

“Our world has been sent many things from Realms, but the inverse is true as well. Sometimes, the Realms suck things away from us.”

“You mean, like getting spirited away.”

“Exactly. Long, long ago, an entire nation vanished in the blink of an eye. Where, then, did Atlantis go?”

“…To a Realm.”

“That’s certainly the logical conclusion. Now, you get it. The Cult’s working theory is that our world and the Realms interact with each other on a cyclical basis, and when they do, each one exerts influence over the other.”

“So did the demon Diablos come from a Realm as well?”

“Not quite. The demon itself was born and raised here, make no mistake. But the same isn’t true of the original.”

“The what?”

“The organism that became the basis for Diablos.”

Beta’s and Epsilon’s gazes grow harsher. “Sure enough…it’s just like we thought.”

“Heh. We theorize that Diablos called the original in from a Realm—one that we’ve taken to calling the First Realm.”

“The First Realm…”

“The Fourth Realm is ranked lower than the First, but Ragnarok is still its ruler. I think that makes it good and clear just how impossible it is for any human to best it.” Mordred sneers before continuing. “Go on, then. Check your last answer. Tell me what you think the Black Rose is.”

The two members of Seven Shadows exchange a look to confirm their thoughts. Then, Beta speaks. “It’s a gate that can connect our world to Realms.”

“Bingo.” An unpleasant smile spreads across Mordred’s face and he offers them a round of applause. “When the Black Rose slew a hundred thousand Velgaltan soldiers in a single night, that happened completely by accident. It just so happened that in that moment, another world linked up with ours and poured magical beasts in by the bucketload. It was a stroke of misfortune for Velgalta, to be sure, but Oriana didn’t exactly get off scot-free. Even with the Velgaltan soldiers dead, the gate kept dumping out magical beasts, and the magical beasts began consuming Oriana and everything in it. If a certain someone hadn’t stepped in and closed the gate, Oriana would have been quite literally obliterated.”

“And that’s when the Cult of Diablos decided to make the entire nation their puppet.”

“Ah, you’re better informed than I thought. Still, I think that’s a pretty uncharitable interpretation. After all, we were the ones who closed the gate and saved the kingdom. And on top of that, our stewardship of the Black Rose ensured that the kingdom would survive in perpetuity. It seemed only reasonable that they give us fair compensation.”

“*Compensation?* From the kingdom…?” Rose says, cutting into the conversation. She can’t hold her tongue any longer.

“That’s right, compensation. Namely, blood…royal blood.”

“The blood of the heroes who defeated Diablos runs thick in the Oriana Kingdom,” Beta explains. Her tone is sympathetic. “The Cult needed that blood…for their experiments.”

Rose balks. “Wait, you mean…”

“It was *your* blood we wanted, Rose Oriana. You were blessed with incredible amounts of magic, even for a royal, and by all rights, they should have turned you over to us as a baby. But that fool of a king refused to,” Mordred says.

Beta elaborates. “That wasn’t the only compensation the Cult demanded. Huge amounts of your tax revenues went to them as well, and the original reason the Oriana Kingdom invested so heavily in the arts was so it could entertain them. On top of that, the way your churches persecuted dark knights was a way for the Cult to prevent Oriana from gaining the strength to rebel against it. Your father wanted to break the cycle. He forged an alliance with Midgar, worked to fix his twisted nation from within, and tried to secede from the Cult. And because of that…they killed him.”

Rose’s lips tremble in disbelief. “It can’t be… You mean, the reason he allowed me to study abroad…”

Beta averts her eyes. “He was trying to get you somewhere safe. I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but we weren’t sure when to do it. If I’d known this was going to happen, I would have told you earlier…”

“The king was a fool,” Mordred says. “But every cloud has its silver lining. Inside the gate, the Black Rose is unstable. We can’t fully control what world it will link us to yet. It will be a hassle, but the Cult is going to have to take direct control of the Oriana Kingdom from now on. If nothing else, that will make our research progress at a faster—”

“I won’t let you.”

A quiet voice cuts in, interrupting Mordred’s speech. What it lacks in volume, however, it makes up for in resolve.

“I’ll pick up where my father left off…and right this nation’s path with my own two hands!”

Rose gets to her feet. Her wedding dress flashes a vivid shade of white against the darkness draping the capital.

Determination burns in her eyes like fire.

Mordred laughs. “Good luck with that. Ragnarok is about to burn Oriana to the ground, so you—”

Then, a fireball comes roaring out of the sky.

“Agh—!”

It’s unclear who screamed, but everyone there leaps backward.

Everyone but Mordred.

When the fiery mass falls from the sky, it crushes his left arm.

“Rgh—!”

He contorts his body in an attempt to pull himself free.

“What the hell even is this?!”

He kicks the mass.

It turns out to be a gigantic arm.

A right arm, to be precise, thick and hideous and burning bloodred.

Mordred wrenches his leg out from under it, then takes another look at the arm.

“It can’t be… This is Ragnarok’s?!” he cries in shock.

He stares at it, but there are no two ways about it. The arm clearly used to belong to Ragnarok.

“W-well, it is just an arm. Losing it would hardly be enough to bring down the king of the Fourth—”

Another fiery lump descends toward them.

A terrible crashing sound booms out as it smashes into the ground. It’s a left arm just as grotesque as the right.

Mordred reels backward. “This doesn’t make sense. Wh-what’s going on…?”

When he whirls around in an attempt to avert his gaze from reality, he sees a silver-haired elf standing behind him.

“I think that makes it pretty clear who the fool is. Master Shadow has had you dancing in the palm of his hand this whole time,” Beta says sympathetically. Her hands move at a blistering clip as she writes something in a notebook.

“What…?”

“Why was it we had so many forces here today? Why did the Black Rose react? Why did Rose Oriana have the key? If you think about it for a minute, you’ll understand what I mean.”

“Th-that’s not possible…,” Mordred mutters blankly. “You mean to say he knew everything from the very start?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“But if he knew, then why not just—?”

Suddenly, Mordred’s eyes go wide with comprehension.

“H-he wanted to observe us, to see what we’d do?! He plans on destroying the Black Rose in its entirety?!”

His scream rings with disbelief.

Beta and Epsilon smile by way of an answer.

“That can’t be, and even if it can, Ragnarok will still… It’ll still…”

More fireballs descend from the sky.

First, a pair of wings.

Two of them, like a pair of massive dead leaves.

Then, two legs and a tail.

They roll by as lumberingly as felled tree trunks.

The final piece to fall is a body—and it’s accompanied by a man clad all in black.

“Sh-Shadow!”

His jet-black longcoat flutters as he swoops down and swings his obsidian blade.

The slash severs Ragnarok’s head from its torso, finally ending the creature’s life.

In its final moments, its flames burn an even more intense shade of red.

As Shadow shakes the blood off his sword, the shadow he casts seems to stretch to the ends of the earth.

The blood burns scarlet as its shoots through the dark sky like fireworks.

“No, no, no… How can Shadow be so powerful?!”

“It’s over.”

The sable beasts overrunning the capital are all gone.

There’s a group of young Shadow Garden women standing beneath the Black Rose and slicing the new offshoots to ribbons as fast as it can spit them out. The girls have already hunted down all the ones scattered across the city.

Number 559 stands at their vanguard. Rose catches her gaze for a moment, and angry sparks fly silently between them.

“You took down the magical beasts, too? How is the Shadow Garden so much stronger than the Fourth Realm…?” Mordred mutters, aghast. Then, a hollow laugh escapes from his throat, as if his soul is trying to flee his body. “Heh-heh… Heh… Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

It’s oddly unsettling.

“I pity you,” Beta says.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. Heh-heh… I-I’m not finished yet.”

Mordred’s eyes snap open. He grabs a fistful of Ragnarok’s flesh and stuffs it into his mouth.

“Wh—”

“This is my power—the culmination of all my efforts!”

Munch, munch.

As he chews the meat and audibly swallows, his body begins changing.

His skin turns as black as the night.

His eyes become red and bloodshot.

His flesh swells, like he’s about to burst.

And his hair, which was already a fiery red, bursts into bloodred flames.

“Master Shadow, should I…?”

Beta looks to Shadow for guidance, and she’s pretty sure she sees him nod ever so slightly. He could have just been tilting his head in confusion, but surely there’s no way that’s the case.

“As you wish.”

Sensing her master’s intentions, she falls back.

She gazes at Shadow with absolute, unshakable faith in her eyes.

“BEHOLD, MY NEW FORM! THIS IS POWER PERFECTED!”

Mordred’s roar splits the air with a bestial fervor.

By now, he looks like a horrible amalgam of Ragnarok and a human being.

“I CAN FEEL THE STRENGTH COURSING THROUGH ME!”

He brings his arm, now wreathed in fire, slamming down on Shadow.

A thunderous crash follows, accompanied by a spray of rubble.

“Heh-heh, now do you see? Do you see my—huh?”

When Mordred pulls his arm back, however, Shadow is nowhere to be seen.

All Mordred finds is the massive crater he himself left.

“WHERE DID YOU GO? DID I BURN YOU DOWN TO NOTHING?”

Then, he hears what sounds like a voice rising from the depths of the abyss.

“You’re just a failed experiment.”

“ME? A FAILED EXPERIMENT?”

Mordred whirls around and finds Shadow standing right there.

Shadow turns his back on Mordred and casts his jet-black gaze up toward the sky. “Even the bat was stronger than you.”

“Big words…FOR A MAN WHO’S TURNING TAIL AND RUNNING!”

Shadow lets out a small laugh. “Merging with beasts is one thing, but letting your intellect degrade to their level? That’s just sad.”

“THE WORDS OF A SORE LOSER!”

Mordred snatches at Shadow with both hands.

But once again, all he grabs is air.

“ _____ !”

Mordred senses someone behind him and turns.

It’s Shadow, still looking up at the sky with his back to Mordred.

“The darkened sky heralds the end. Can you hear the nascent monarch’s cry?”

“SHUT UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!” Mordred howls.

Magic gathers at Shadow’s right hand. It’s so powerful the very air begins to quiver.

The magic gradually gains in intensity, and before long, the entire capital is shaking.

Tempestuous winds blow every whichway.

Clouds whirl through the sky and spit out lightning.

The magic practically seems to suck it all in as it continues collecting itself. The people at the center of that little world begin seeing flashes of bluish-purple light.

Finally, it gathers at his obsidian sword, spiraling through the air and drawing an elaborate pattern over the weapon's blade.

"I AM—"

Shadow's voice rumbles out deeply, and the bluish-purple magic glows ever brighter.

"WH-WHAT IS THAT MAGIC?! ARE YOU EVEN REALLY HU—?"

"—ATOMIC."

With that, the bluish-purple light blots out the world.

When the light dies down, the world stands completely altered.

The sky is blue again, and the sun's rays are streaming down. Rose can see her breath in the crisp, clear winter air.

Shadow stands at the very center of the world, raising his jet-black sword to the sky.

"Are you…? Are you really…?"

Rose starts to say something, but then goes quiet.

For some reason, two piano players are starting to overlap in her mind.

There's no way. It simply isn't possible. Yet she finds herself drawn to Shadow's each and every movement all the same.

"So, that was Master Shadow's plan for the Black Rose…"

Beta and Epsilon look up at the sky. There, they see the shattered Black Rose.

Not even it survived Shadow's mighty attack.

As they watch, it slowly crumbles to pieces. As it does, a small mass gets sucked into it.

The mass is covered in blackened skin and red hair. It's Mordred, now reduced to nothing more than a head.

Then…

"I give myself to the ebony vortex, and vanish into the world of darkness…"

With that, the shadowy figure dives straight into the Black Rose.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Master Shadow?"

The Black Rose swallows Shadow whole.

The girls stare up in shock—

"I-I-I'm coming, too!"

—and Beta, tears in her eyes, dives in as well.

Not a moment later, the Black Rose disappears, gone from the world for good.

Everything is dead silent for a little while.

Epsilon mutters a sort of strange incantation to herself as she stares at the sky. “…I-I’m sure Master Shadow had some grand design in mind. Of course he did. His resourcefulness lets him see through everything. His eyes are like those of a god. His radiant gaze burns incandescent, and his jet-black blade cleaves the skies and parts the seas…”

“Oh no, my ring…”

For some reason, Rose’s wedding ring lies shattered as well.

Rose takes that as a sign of what’s become of her beloved. The blood drains from her face.

And with that, the battle for the Oriana Kingdom comes to a close.

The Eminence in Shadow

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I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Rise of the Fancy Hoodlum Slayer!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Auxiliary Chapter

Auxiliary Chapter

Rise of the Fancy Hoodlum Slayer!

Akane Nishino is a second-year student at Sakurazaka High School, and she hates one of her classmates with a burning passion.

The classmate in question has black hair and eyes, forgettable looks, and bags under his eyes that always make him look tired.

His name is Minoru Kageno. Not only does she hate him, but to make matters worse, his seat is the one right next to hers.

Kage is Japanese for *shadow*, and true to his name, Minoru Kageno is as inconspicuous as a shadow.

He's a C student, he's unremarkable at sports, he isn't in any school clubs, and although he doesn't have a lot of friends, he has plenty of people he knows well enough to make small talk with.

He's the kind of average, unremarkable student you could find in any school in the country.

Akane didn't hate him at first. That wasn't to say she liked him, but she got along with him about as well as she did with any of her classmates.

The more she interacted with him, though, the more she found that there was one thing about him that she just couldn't stand.

It was the way he greeted her.

Every morning, the two of them get to school at the last minute possible—right before the gate is about to close.

And because they always get there at the same time, they always end up greeting each other.

Today, as usual, she runs into her least favorite classmate at the school gate. "Morning, Kageno," Akane says to him.

Minoru replies in the same level tone of voice as always. "Morning, Nishimura."

*It's Nishi*no*, not Nishi*mura*!* Akane screams internally. Outwardly, however, she keeps smiling as she heads for the shoe rack.

They've been in the same class for three months, and every morning since then, they've had the exact same exchange.

Akane didn't say anything about it for the first month, assuming that he would eventually notice his mistake, but when Golden Week came and went and he still hadn't gotten her name right, she eventually decided to correct him.

She can still remember in vivid detail just how that played out.

“You know, Kageno, my name isn’t actually Nishimura.”

“Huh?” Minoru blinks repeatedly and looks at her face with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. “It isn’t?”

“No, it’s—”

“Wait, hold up. I remember now. You’re a Named Character.”

“A what?”

Akane cocks her head at the unfamiliar term.

“Never mind. I make sure to memorize the names of all the important characters, but I guess sometimes I get one wrong.”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens to everyone.”

Minoru bows apologetically, and Akane smiles.

However, his next words cause her to freeze.

“Sorry about that, Nishitani.”

Akane clenches her fists, driven by an urge to sink a right straight punch directly into that idiot’s face.

“…It’s Nishino.”

“…Huh?”

“My name is *Nishino*.”

The two of them stare at each other. You could cut the silence with a knife.

Akane doesn’t say another word to him for the rest of the day.

Then, the next morning rolls around.

The two of them bump into each other by the gate, just like always.

The night’s passage has done a fair bit to quell Akane’s rage. After all, it’s not like Minoru meant any harm. There’s no sense in getting so worked up over a mere misremembered name.

She decides to greet him like normal and just forget about what happened yesterday.

“Morning, Kageno.”

“Morning, Nishimura.”

You’re right back where you started!

Akane wants to scream, but she hides that urge behind a steely smile.

The part that she finds most obnoxious is the way Minoru is acting as though the conversation they had yesterday didn’t even happen.

He’s calling her Nishimura just like he always does, and just like always, he isn’t even looking at her.

He does technically turn his eyes her way whenever they greet each other or chat, but it never feels like he’s actually seeing her. His gaze is distant, like it’s focused on something far off in the distance.

More than anything else, that’s what *really* pisses her off.

The name thing is annoying, but it’s not that big of a deal.

But the way she never feels like she even enters his gaze? She can't stand it.

Once she notices that about Minoru, she starts hating his guts.

From then on, Akane starts going out of her way to avoid interacting with him.

She still greets him each morning, but that's all. He keeps getting her name wrong, but she doesn't bother correcting him anymore.

She also avoids talking to him whenever possible, despite the fact that they're seatmates. If she absolutely doesn't have a choice because of classwork or something, she keeps any conversations with him short and to the point.

She would prefer to just ignore him 24/7, but due to her unique circumstances, she wants to avoid doing anything that will make her stand out more than she already does.

And boy, does Akane Nishino stand out.

Her dark hair is sleek and elegant, and she's so attractive she draws the gazes of boys and girls alike.

On top of that, she isn't just a normal high school student. She also works as an actress.

Her classmates know all about her job, of course. If they found out that she and Minoru were on poor terms, it could give rise to all sorts of unfortunate rumors. Better to nip that possibility in the bud.

Akane was a fairly successful child actress, but around the time she started middle school, she was involved in a scandal and had to temporarily put her career on hold.

Ever since then, Akane has been forced to hide her true self.

She's had to play the part of the honor student to avoid being hated by her teachers, as well as the part of the popular girl to avoid being hated by the other students. She's lived her life trying not to give anyone a reason to resent her.

And so she's done her utmost not to let that asshole Minoru hate her, either, nor to let anyone else realize how much she hates him.

Akane isn't a member of any school clubs.

She normally heads straight home when classes end, but on that day, she has supplementary lessons to attend. She often has to skip class on account of her job, so those supplementary lessons are the only way she can make up her attendance.

Akane had some other things to take care of as well, so by the time she gets out, the sun's already set.

"And my phone's dead, too…," she says with a sigh as she walks through the school gate.

She would normally call for her personal chauffeur, but with her phone being out of juice, that sadly isn't an option.

However, her house is only half an hour away on foot. It's certainly walkable.

On top of that, it's early summer, so even with the sun being set, the temperature is still surprisingly pleasant. Akane decides to stretch her legs for a change.

Now that she thinks about it, it's been a while since she last walked home from school. The last time was probably the walking bus her class used to do back when she was in elementary school.

Starting in middle school, her family decided to start sending a car for her each day.

Because of that, she's kind of excited to head home on her own two feet for once. She walks down the darkened streets without a worry in her mind.

However, that excitement causes her to let her guard down.

All of a sudden, a shiny black station wagon pulls up beside her, and a brawny man gets out.

She doesn't notice him until it's too late.

"…Huh?"

The man wraps his thick arm around her neck.

"Ah…"

He squeezes tight. In a few seconds, she's out cold.

The last thing she sees is a familiar-looking black-haired young man running toward them.

"Urgh…"

When Akane opens her eyes, she finds herself in a dimly lit warehouse.

Her wrists and ankles are bound, and there's a gag shoved in her mouth.

She's still a little out of it. She remembers the black car; she remembers the man choking her, and…she remembers spotting someone, maybe?

"Mmm! Mmmm!!"

She tries to call for help, but the gag prevents her from forming any words or generating any real volume.

"Oh hey, you're up."

She hears a hoarse male voice coming from behind her. She freezes.

"I'd quit struggling if I were you. Unless you wanna get yourself hurt, that is."

The man looks to be about six foot three, and he isn't just big, either. His muscles are well-defined, even through his clothes.

There's another man behind him, as well. The two of them must be working together.

“Don’t worry, little missy,” the second man says. “We already sent the ransom note to your folks, and as long as they pay up, you’ll be home without a scratch before you know it.”

The big guy smiles evilly. “Gotta say, though, that was pretty careless. Heiress to Nishino Zaibatsu, walking home alone at night like that? Some bad men coulda snatched you right up.”

He chuckles mockingly and walks over to where Akane is lying collapsed on the ground.

“Mmmmm!”

Stay away!

Akane tries to scream, but the words won’t come out.

She crawls across the ground to try to put some distance between them.

“Whoop. Where you think you’re going, little missy?”

The big guy grabs her slender legs and yanks her toward him.

Then, he hoists up her jaw and takes a closer look at her attractive face.

“Damn, girl. No wonder they let you work as an actress.”

“Mmm! Mmmm!!”

She shakes her head to try to resist.

When she does, the man slaps her across the cheek.

“ _____ !”

“Don’t fight it.”

Akane can feel the taste of blood fill her mouth. The teardrops that had been welling up in the corners of her eyes finally start falling.

“Y’know, I hear this ain’t your first ride on the kidnapping train.”

Twitch.

Akane freezes.

“It was right when you first started middle school, right? Although last time, I hear it was a stalker who did it.”

The memories she’d tried so hard to forget flood back through her mind. Her whole body begins trembling.

“Y’know, I totally get how the guy felt. Now, why so scared, kid?”

“…Mmm! Mmmmmmmmmm!!”

“Give up. No one’s comin’ to save you.”

Akane tries to twist away, but the man uses his muscular arm to pin her down.

Help!

Then, right as she screams internally, it happens.

Kshhhh!

The sound of glass shattering echoes through the warehouse.

“Who’s there?!”

One of the windows is broken.

Moonlight streams in, illuminating the intruder standing atop a pile of glass shards.

He’s wearing a black sweatshirt, black sweatpants, and black work boots, and he has a black ski mask over his face.

He looks sketchy as hell, dressed all in black like that. At first glance, it seems clear that he's with the kidnappers.

Clop. Clop. Clop.

His boots click against the floor as he slowly strides toward them.

"Who the hell are you?!" the big guy shouts.

"Who, me? I'm just…a normal old Fancy Hoodlum Slayer."

The Hoodlum Slayer stops to adjust his ski mask. The eye holes were misaligned.

"What is this, some sorta joke?!"

As the big guy roars, his accomplice sneaks up behind the Hoodlum Slayer and swings a bat at him.

It's the perfect surprise attack—yet the Hoodlum Slayer dodges it like he has eyes in the back of his head.

"Huh?!"

"You cast a shadow in the moonlight. You're a rank amateur."

With that, the Hoodlum Slayer whirls around and slams his fist into the second man.

Between his black clothes and the dark warehouse, his attack is nigh impossible to see.

There's a muffled sound, and the accomplice crumples from the knees down. He doesn't move another inch.

"That jaw strike… This guy knows what he's doing." The big guy lets go of Akane and rises to his feet. He cracks his neck as he glares at the Hoodlum Slayer. "Too bad for you, though—I'm ex-military."

He draws a knife and holds it at the ready.

The Hoodlum Slayer lowers his center of gravity and stands at the ready as well. "A military man, huh? Perfect. I've always wanted to try fighting a soldier."

The two men square off in the darkness.

They close the gap bit by tiny bit, and then—

"Die!"

The kidnapper makes the first move.

Using an oblique stance, he steps in and swings his knife.

It's easy to believe that he used to be a soldier. Despite his bulky frame, his movements are nimble and efficient.

The knife strike is aimed at his foe's throat, and the Hoodlum Slayer attempts to block it by raising his right arm.

A loud, metallic *clang* rings out.

"What?!"

The knife is caught on the Hoodlum Slayer's hand.

On closer inspection, the Hoodlum Slayer is holding something—a black crowbar.

And what's more, he's wielding it almost like a *tonfa*.

"A-a crowbar?!"

“Crowbars are great. They’re sturdy enough not to break, you can buy ’em anywhere, they’re portable, you can talk your way out of having one if the police question you… At least, you probably can. But best of all, you can use ’em like *tonfas*.”

“What?!”

In the blink of an eye, the Hoodlum Slayer spins his arm under the kidnapper’s.

His crowbar draws an arc through the air and smashes into the other man’s arm.

The knife tumbles from the kidnapper’s hand.

“Shit—”

Not a moment later, the crowbar makes for the kidnapper himself.

The big guy responds immediately by putting up his fists and countering.

The crowbar slams into his beefy muscles, and his punch grazes the Hoodlum Slayer’s ski mask.

Crowbar and fist clash again and again in the moonlit warehouse.

However, the Hoodlum Slayer is gradually getting pushed back. Each time he blocks the kidnapper’s heavy punches, he has to fall back one step, then another.

“Heh. That’s one hell of a handicap you’re working with,” the big guy says as he sends the Hoodlum Slayer reeling yet again. “You’re tough, sure. And I can tell you’ve been in a couple fights. But you’ve got one big weakness. You’re, what, five seven, maybe one hundred and thirty pounds? But see, me, I’m six three and two hundred and fifty. Physically, we aren’t even in the same league. Crowbar or not, all *I’ve* gotta do is protect my head. But you? A single one of my punches anywhere would put you on the floor.”

The man’s voice rings with confidence. The Hoodlum Slayer quietly fixes his gaze on him. “You’re right. The sad truth is, the way I am now, even an ex-soldier can give me trouble…”

“You wanna throw in the towel?”

“Nah… It just means I’m gonna have to get serious.”

The Hoodlum Slayer adjusts his stance.

“What?”

“The way I saw it, crowbars had a bright future. The *tonfa*-like shape, the weight, the sturdiness, the portability…they were full of potential just waiting to be unlocked. So I went out, night after night, and as I beat up all sorts of obnoxious, motorcycle-riding delinquents, I arrived at a conclusion…”

“No way! *You’re* the Ski Mask Berserker who’s been terrorizing the local motorcycle gangs with nothing but a crowbar?!”

It’s practically a legend how all the motorcycle gangs in the area have started actually wearing helmets on account of the Ski Mask Berserker. Wearing a helmet is the only way to stay safe when you don’t know when an attack might be coming.

“See, the conclusion I reached after beating up those motorcycle gangs is that while you *can* use crowbars like *tonfas*…the best thing to do with ’em is just whack people!”

The Hoodlum Slayer brings his crowbar crashing down toward his opponent’s face.

It’s a big swing, but the motion is fast as hell, and it’s brimming with pure, unbridled violence.

The kidnapper brings his arm up to protect his head, but when he does, a dull noise sounds out.

“Rrgh! M-my arm…,” he moans, clutching his arm in pain.

“It’s probably broken. See, the trick to unlocking a crowbar’s potential is to strike with the outside of the part that bends to the side. You’d think that hitting with the pointy bit would be best, but that’s an amateur’s mistake.”

He shifts his grip as he explains. Not like *this*, like *this*.

Then, he strikes the kidnapper again.

He hits him with flowing movements, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. The kidnapper catches a brief glimpse of who he really is—at the man who beat up hundreds of bikers.

“Agh! W-wait, hold on—”

Wham, wham.

“C-cut it out, we can—”

Wham, wham, wham.

“Geh… Guhhh…”

Wham, wham, wham, wham!

The dull noise echoes through the warehouse on repeat.

Violence is power, and the Hoodlum Slayer the embodiment of that ideal.

He keeps single-mindedly bringing his crowbar down, and eventually, the burly kidnapper stops moving.

Drops of blood drip from the crowbar. *Drip. Drip.*

“It’s no good. How am I supposed to get there if I struggle against some lowly ex-soldier? I need to become stronger.”

He looks up at the moon hanging in the sky outside the window—

“I need more *power*…”

—and wistfully extends his hand.

It’s like he’s trying to grasp hold of the moon, even though his hand will never reach it.

He shakes his head in an act of rebellion against that simple truth, then turns and fixes his gaze on Akane.

He picks up the knife the man dropped and approaches her.

“Mmm—MMMMM!”

Akane senses she’s in danger and tries to flee, but there’s nowhere to run. The knife comes down on her with merciless efficiency.

“Mmm?”

It slices through the restraints on her wrists and ankles.

Now that she’s free, she looks up at the sketchy man in black with the ski mask and the crowbar.

He looks down at her in turn—

“From now on, be more careful on your way home.”

—and offers her a piece of advice before leaving.

Akane watches him go in blank amazement. After a little while, she finally realizes that he just saved her.

“Fancy Hoodlum Slayer… Who are you…?”

For some reason, his voice sounded strangely familiar.

The next day, despite her parents’ concerns, Akane heads to school like always.

Thinking about what happened yesterday still fills her with fear, but for some reason, remembering the Fancy Hoodlum Slayer makes her want to break out laughing.

“Heh-heh… He was so dorky.”

She walks through the gate and, as usual, runs into her least favorite classmate. “Morning, Kageno.”

“Morning, Nishino.”

“…Huh?”

Akane is so surprised, she forgets to keep walking.

Minoru got her name right. And what’s more, she gets the feeling that he’s actually looking at her this time.

But that’s not all. There’s something about his voice.

“…There’s no way.”

She shakes her head to banish that ridiculous thought, then chases after Minoru.

“Kageno, wait up!”

She wants to give chatting with him another go.

The Eminence in Shadow

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Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Lurking in the Darkness in Fantastical Japan!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Lurking in the Darkness in Fantastical Japan!

“Where am I?” I mutter in confusion.

Getting sucked into a black hole and vanishing alongside the darkness is a pretty baller way to make an exit.

That was the logic behind me jumping in like I did, but I never expected it to spit me out in the ruins of some city.

“Well, I can always just run home, I guess. Still, this place looks weirdly familiar…”

With that thought in mind, I glance around and realize something.

The ground is made of cracked asphalt, and although they’re covered in ivy, there are utility poles all around and even a bunch of dilapidated houses by the sides of the road.

The nameplate on one of them reads *“Tanaka.”*

“No way… I’m in Japan?”

I take a good long look at everything around me.

There are crumbling houses, plants growing up through concrete, rusted-over cars…

“Yeah, this is totally Japan.”

Dunno why, but I’m back.

In fact, this is even the town where I used to live.

I guess after I got reincarnated over into my new world, I must still have been linked to Japan somehow.

“Well, here I am.”

The question is, what happened here?

This definitely wasn’t how things were when I left. There’s no one around, so I guess there must’ve been some sort of big disaster or something.

Mysteries, mysteries…

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, I sense someone behind me and whirl around.

There’s someone there, all right.

“Master Shadooooooow! Ow!”

Beta comes tumbling down.

She lands on her butt, then looks around with her eyes wide.

“Master Shadow, thank goodness you aren’t hur—wait, where are we?!”

You really didn’t have to come, Beta.

Wait, scratch that. I just got a great idea.

She doesn’t know a thing about Japan, so I can use this chance to do a sweet eminence in shadow bit.

“Have you figured out where we are?” I ask her.

“Huh? We, um…” She thinks for a moment, then hangs her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“We’re in another world… This world is called ‘Earth,’ and this land is called ‘Japan.’”

“W-wow! To think that you already investigated the names of the world and country we’re in…!”

“I just took the available visual data, organized it, and analyzed it. Surely, that much is obvious.”

“Your wonders never cease, my lord!”

Beta’s eyes are practically glittering. Heh, this is pretty fun.

“So, Master Shadow, why did you decide to come to Urth?”

“Gaea whispered to me and told me to shine even brighter.”

I just jumped in the hole because I thought it’d be cool, but there’s no way in hell I’m gonna tell her *that*.

“So, you mean that you weren’t satisfied…and that you’re seeking to reach even greater heights?! Oh, what a noble mentality!”

“Yeah, that. What you said.” I’m tired of being in Shadow mode, so I switch back to acting like my usual self. “For starters, we should get changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our outfits are too conspicuous for this world. Let’s go to the Tanakas’ place and find some new clothes.”

I don’t sense anyone around, but if anyone spotted us like this, they’d think we were cosplayers or something.

“What’s a Tanakas?”

“The people who live here. See the nameplate?”

“No way… You’ve already deciphered this world’s script?”

“Yeah, I’ve figured out how most of this world’s language works. It’s easy, really. All you have to do is look for the patterns.”

Beta is so moved, she quivers. “Th-that’s incredible. Learning a language just by looking for patterns is a feat so unthinkably complex, I can’t even… Only Master Shadow could make it seem so simple.”

Bwa-ha-ha, bask in my radiance. Thanks to my past life, I have a flawless command of Japanese.

“Let’s go.”

On that note, I grab Beta—who’s taking some sort of notes—and barge into the Tanakas’ house at top speed.

The Tanaka house is in a sorry state. The building itself has fallen into ruin, and the food is too rotten to eat.

I start out by rummaging through the rooms and grabbing whatever articles of clothing catch my eye.

I end up settling on a hoodie, some jeans, and a pair of sneakers—the perfect outfit for an autumn afternoon like this one.

Then, we have Beta.

"Master Shadow, I really do apologize for all the trouble."

She's modeling yet another outfit.

"What do you think about this one…?"

"…Beta, that's what we call a 'school swimsuit.'"

When Beta comes out from behind the door, my eyes meet navy fabric, fair skin, and bulging flesh.

The swimsuit is practically bursting at the seams.

"A suit for swimming, you say…? But it's fantastically elastic, and the material is efficient and easy to move in."

"Maybe, but you'll be chilly as hell."

"I can just use magic to make up for—"

"Vetoed."

"Aw…"

Beta slumps her shoulders and leaves the room.

I wish she'd just gone with the outfit I put together for her. She said, "Thank you so much!" when I gave it to her, but the look on her face told a different story, so I told her she could pick whatever she wanted and left her to her own devices.

As it turns out, no good deed goes unpunished.

I sigh and get back to my rummaging.

This is fine, though.

It's not like we're in any sort of rush, after all. No harm in taking things slow.

As a former Japanese citizen, I'm kind of curious about what happened to this world. I hope humanity didn't go extinct, but I guess you never know with these things.

The three things we need right now are food, water, and intel.

I keep looking through the rubble and eventually find a couple of phones and tablets. I test them to see if they'll turn on, but no dice. There's some paper media, too, but most of it is too weathered and rain-damaged for its text to be legible.

I can just barely make out the words *"Japan Collapses"* on a scrap of newspaper, followed by something illegible.

It'd be one thing if it said "Japan's *Economy* Collapses," but man. "Japan Collapses," huh?

I wonder if they meant it metaphorically or in actuality. If it's the latter, something really bad must have happened.

Once I finish searching the room, I head to the hallway and open the next door down.

When I do, I'm greeted by a surprise.

"I *thought* I smelled blood…"

Inside, I find three bone-bleached corpses.

Their blood and bodily fluids have long since dried up, but the smell still faintly lingers. From the look of it, they've been dead for at least a few years.

They're accompanied by bloodstains, and not just on the floor. There's blood splattered on the walls, too. Plus, their skeletons have been crushed, and there are a couple bones unaccounted for.

However they died, it clearly wasn't pleasant.

"Too grotesque for a normal old homicide…"

Was it revenge, maybe? The work of a serial killer? Or something else entirely?

I lay out the shattered bones and try to rearrange them into some semblance of their original shapes.

"The thigh bone's connected to the hip bone, the hip bone's connected to the backbone…"

There's no way I'm gonna be able to completely reconstruct the skeleton, but even so, I'm able to fit a bunch of the parts back together.

The bones begin to tell a story—a story of teeth.

When I reassemble one shattered femur, I find a deep set of bite marks in it.

The teeth definitely weren't human. Whatever bit these guys, it had a big-ass mouth and some pointy, pointy fangs.

"Was it a big dog? No, it'd have to be something even larger…"

We're looking at something about as big as a lion. The problem is, lions aren't native to Japan, and while one could have escaped from a zoo, that's so unlikely it's barely worth considering.

Huh.

I guess it could've been a bear?

No other likely culprit comes to mind, but whatever did this, it was definitely a carnivore.

Not only did it attack the poor saps who lived here, it ate them, too.

"…Excuse me, my lord?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm so sorry to keep bothering you, but what do you think of this outfit?"

When Beta comes in, she gives the skeletons a brief glance, but quickly turns her attention back to me and does a twirl.

I dunno what metric she's basing these outfits on, but how much skin they leave exposed seems to be a high priority for her.

"Beta…where did you find that?"

Once again, the outfit she's chosen is risqué as all hell.

“In what looked like a bedroom. It was under the bed, almost like someone was keeping it hidden.”

Yeah, I’ll bet.

“Beta, that outfit…isn’t for day-to-day use.”

“But it looks just like my slime bodysuit, and it fits me perfectly.”

“‘Perfectly’ is a bit of a stretch. Literally. That’s a BDSM outfit.”

The black, glossy fabric sticks tightly to her skin, and what’s more, there’s so little of it that, just like last time, her body is bulging out of it. All it would take is a single jostle to send certain parts spilling right out.

The outfit is clearly designed for nighttime activities.

“Beady Essem?”

“Yup. It’s designed for an *extremely* specialized purpose.”

“What a shame. And it’s so cute.” Beta slumps her shoulders dejectedly. “I even found this mask and whip with it, too…”

She dons the lustrous black mask and cracks the whip.

“I assume they used this to conceal their identity and fight evil, just like we do. I’m a little puzzled about the whip, though. It seems a touch too flimsy to use in an actual fight.”

She cracks it a couple more times, causing her whole body to jiggle as she envisions trying to use it in combat.

“Beta, that whip is a weapon made specifically for subduing a very weak creature. A weak little pig that’s practically dying to be told what a bad boy they are…”

“I didn’t realize Urth had pigs like that… I’m learning so much.”

Beta’s eyes gleam as she nods contemplatively.

“I must say, Master Shadow, I’m amazed! You’ve already figured out what this world’s specialized clothes are for, and it hasn’t even been an hour since we got here!”

“Uhhh…yup. That is definitely a thing that I did.”

“Incredible! I’ll have to work harder so I can learn to figure things out that quickly.”

“…Best of luck with that.”

“Thank you!”

Beta’s smile is downright dazzling.

“Out of curiosity, why do you keep picking such revealing outfits?”

“Well, it’s so rare I get an opportunity like this…”

What’s so rare about it?

Is she talking about getting to try out clothes made of unfamiliar materials? Their unfamiliar designs? Their unfamiliar features? All of the above?

“C’mon, go pick out some *normal* clothes.”

“Yes, sir…”

Beta begrudgingly trudges out of the room.

By the time all’s said and done, it takes us another full hour to leave the Tanaka residence.

“So, where are we going?” Beta asks.

She’s all done changing, and we just left the house.

The getup she settled on was a baggy knitted sweater, jeans, a pair of sneakers, and a hat to hide her ears and hair. I was able to sell her on it by emphasizing how easy the whole thing was to move in.

I also have a thirty-liter backpack I grabbed, which I filled with empty bottles and our spare clothes.

“We’ll start by finding a river to get water from. Then, we’ll gather more information on this world.”

I wanna find out if this really is the same Japan I’m from, and if it is, why it’s fallen into ruin.

“I agree, that’s a good plan. This world seems to be full of fascinating technology.”

And so, we set off in search of water.

If I conserve my energy, I can function for at least a month without food, and I assume Beta can do the same.

Water, though—water’ll getcha. I’ve never tested how long I can go without it, but even I’d probably hit my limit at around ten days.

“I wonder what these pillars are for? It looks like they’re made of concrete, but why do they have them at such regular intervals? Are they used in some sort of religious ritual?”

As we walk, Beta’s eager gaze lands on the telephone poles. She’s armed with a pen and notepad, and she’s sketching at a blistering pace.

“Heh. Turn your gaze to the black wires running between the pillars. See that metal in their cross sections? From that, you can deduce that they’re used to deliver electricity to each of the residences.”

“Oh, you’re right. The wires *are* connected to the houses. This world must use electricity in really sophisticated ways. I can’t believe you found the answer so easily from so few clues.”

“Heh-heh-heh…”

“But…if that’s the case, then why don’t they just bury the wires underground?”

“Huh? Well, that’s, errr…”

I dunno.

“…for c-cost performance reasons? A-a-and it would make it harder to perform maintenance. Oh yeah, and earthquakes—underground wires would run into big problems if they ever had an earthquake.”

“But wouldn’t an earthquake knock the pillars over, too?”

“They, uhhhhhhh, they’re really sturdy pillars.”

Beta nods. “You’re absolutely right. Burying the wires underground *would* be time-consuming, so if hanging them up is inexpensive, it’s probably a viable alternative.”

“For sure, for sure, for sure.”

“But then, if this ‘Jappan’ had all this advanced technology, how did it fall into such ruin? I don’t see any signs of drought or flooding, so I find it hard to imagine this all having been caused by a natural disaster.”

“Your confusion is reasonable, but…I have a pretty good idea of what happened here.”

That part’s true, actually.

“Wh… You’ve already deduced the cause?!”

“Indeed…,” I say with a meaningful smile.

I have a solid theory, although I’m not quite certain of anything yet.

I don’t wanna say it out loud in case I end up being wrong, but the cause is probably related to the magic wafting through the air.

To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever actually found magic in my old world aside from those two lights I saw right before I died. Now, though, this place is brimming with the stuff.

In other words, Japan probably fell victim to some sort of magical incident.

When that happened, all the sudden changes caused a massive panic.

That’s what I’ve got my money on, at least.

Beta’s nose twitches. “I smell water in that direction.”

“You’re right.”

I used to live here, so I already know where the river is, but that’s neither here nor there.

When we arrive at the river, it’s way clearer than I remember it being. I guess that’s what happens when all the humans disappear.

“It looks potable, at least,” Beta says.

I divvy up the empty bottles and begin filling mine with water.

We're not boiling the water, but thanks to magic tempering, our stomachs are like steel, so we'll be fine.

"I see fish, so we should be all right as far as food goes, too," Beta notes. "Shall we catch some?"

"Nah, let's worry about that later. We can just go hunting if we get hungry."

"Ah, you're right. There are birds in the sky as well, so we have plenty of options."

"Ayup."

I load the bottles into my backpack and hoist it onto my back.

"Here, let me take that," Beta offers.

"Nah, I got it. In this nation's culture, it's the custom for men to carry the luggage."

"I see… I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you've already mastered this world's customs."

"Of course not. Now, as for our next destination…"

"I'd like to go to some sort of communal building. We might be able to find some documents or impressive feats of engineering there."

"Hmm. In that case, maybe the library…? Oh, we can go to Nishino University!"

Nishino Zaibatsu is crazy rich, and one of the things they did with their money is build a ridiculously fancy, high-tech university atop a nearby mountain. It's a school for pampered rich kids, and an enemy of the masses. I once swore to take a crowbar and smash every window on the campus, but I ended up getting reincarnated before I could make good on that vow.

"What's that?" Beta asks.

"According to some reliable intel, a bunch of rich scoundrels dumped a boatload of cash into building a fancy research institution. They probably used it to perform illegal human experimentation."

"I see this world is no stranger to evil."

"Wherever there is light, so too is there darkness. Such is the way of the world…"

"Wise words, my lord."

And so, we set off.

We stop by my old house on the way there and find that there's nothing left of it but rubble.

Mom, Dad, and my dog, John, had to move to America because of a job relocation, though, so they're probably fine.

The sun begins setting, and honestly, the vermilion autumn sky is super pretty.

We could've made it to the university in no time if we'd just dashed there at full speed, but Beta was having so much fun sightseeing, and I was having so much fun giving her exposition that we ended up taking it fairly slow.

It's fine, though. Either way, we'll get there by the end of the day.

As we walk, a serious expression crosses Beta's face. "After seeing all this, I got to thinking…"

"Oh yeah?"

"The alphabet this 'Jappan' uses looks oddly familiar."

"It does…?"

Beta's from a whole different world, so there's no way she's ever seen written Japanese before, unless—ah!

Now that she mentions it, I used Japanese in that coded message I gave her, didn't I?

Wait, does that mean she actually deciphered it?!

No, no. Let's think about this rationally.

There's no way a fifteen-year-old elf could possibly have done that. She probably just subconsciously noticed the similarities between the characters, that's all.

"Y-you're probably just imagining things."

"Am I? I wonder…"

This could be bad.

If Beta figures out how to read Japanese, she'll figure out that all my Shadow Wisdom is actually just from here.

When I told her and the others about chocolate and paper money and banks and literature, I told them that it was all stuff I invented on my own.

I gotta get her back to her original world, pron…to?

Then, I finally realize something.

How *are* we supposed to get back?

"What's wrong, Master Shadow? It looks like you've broken out into a cold sweat."

"I'm, uhhh…doing thermoregulation training."

All I wanted to do was pull off a badass exit, but now I'm in a giant mess!

How could I, of all people, forget to plan out an escape route?

"Master Shadow, you're shivering."

"I'm, uhhh…experimenting with a technique where I vibrate my body to generate sonic waves."

"That's my Master Shadow—always striving to better himself!"

C'mon, settle down.

I got to this world by jumping in a black hole, so if I find another black hole to jump in, it should shoot me right back.

It's gonna be okay. Everything's gonna work out.

For starters, I just need to look for a powerful source of magic…

Before I can finish my thought, however, I catch a whiff of the breeze.

"Hmm. I know this smell…"

It’s one I’m well familiar with—the putrid stink of death.

It’s like the way the Tanaka house smelled, but way, way stronger. The odor is practically suffocating.

“I think the smell is coming from that building over there,” Beta says.

“Ah…the hospital.”

“You mean, like a large infirmary? I guess this society must not have developed magical healing techniques.”

“It would appear not.”

I mean, they weren’t supposed to have magic at all.

“It seems like the smell is coming from the top floor,” I say.

“So it does,” Beta replies.

“Shall we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“On my mark, jump.”

I can sense traces of magic coming from the hospital.

Hopefully, there’ll be a clue there that can lead me to the black hole.

The two of us jump in unison and go for a shortcut to the top floor. Glass shatters as we successfully make our dynamic entry.

The lights are off, so the room is dark. Fortunately, we could move around just fine even if it were pitch-black.

“It’s a sickroom,” I note.

“I see bloodstains.”

“And signs of a struggle.”

“No bodies, though.”

Still, it’s probably nearby. The same thing happens a lot when people get attacked by bandits. Once someone’s lost this much blood, they probably aren’t getting far.

We open the door and head out of the room.

“Bingo.”

When we do, we find a set of corpses scattered across the blood-soaked hallway.

Beta doesn’t so much as hesitate before going in and manually inspecting them.

“It looks like they were eaten by some kind of animal.”

“Makes sense.”

I don’t want to get my hands dirty or for the smell to get stuck to my clothes, so I leave the autopsy to Beta.

Considering the stage of their decomposition, I estimate that they probably died less than a week ago.

Oh hey, Beta made gloves out of her slime.

Slime gloves, huh? I never thought of that.

She’s a smart cookie, that Beta.

“I think it’s safe to say these were humans from this world. All told, there are three bodies: two men, one woman, all adults.” As Beta speaks, she lays out the three skulls with some hair still attached. “Based on the

ambient temperature and humidity, I estimate the time of death at about five days ago."

"In other words, there were people here at least that recently," I muse.

"We might be able to find other survivors."

Then, I sense it.

Something in the hospital is on the move.

"Beta."

"Hmm…? Ah, we're not alone."

A moment later, Beta notices the same thing.

There's a presence one floor down.

"Let's go check it out."

Without further ado, we barrel down the stairs to catch the creatures.

The creatures in question are some sort of darkish beasts.

I take two of them, and Beta takes a third.

We grab them by the hind legs and yank them onto the ground.

"Do you think these things are behind the crime scene up there?" Beta asks.

"Probably, yeah."

We observe the beasts as they struggle and thrash about.

"You know," she says, "they look a lot like the magical beasts that were laying waste to Oriana."

"You're right, they do."

Now that she mentions it, they *do* kinda resemble the black creatures that got summoned alongside the big bat.

They have that same black fur, and their red eyes look similar, too. In terms of how much mana they have, though, the creatures in Oriana have these guys beat by a country mile.

They're kind of like a cross between a lion and a bear, and between that and the admittedly meager amount of mana they have, an average human would have a pretty tough time dealing with one of these.

Compared to me and Beta, though…

"…They're so weak."

"They really are," Beta agrees.

She plants her foot atop the raging beast's neck and stomps down, pulverizing its throat and ending its life.

Blood goes spraying everywhere, so I have to use the beasts I've grabbed as shields to block it.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my lord."

"Don't worry about it."

I have one creature in each hand, and I smash them together to kill them.

Y'know, looking at how big the fangs on these things are, I bet these are the same type of beasts as the ones behind the Tanaka house attack.

Looks like Japan's discovery of magic did a real number on the environment.

Did the local fauna hit the gym or something?

"Master Shadow, are these the weak little pigs you mentioned earlier?"

"No, the pigs are even weaker than this."

"Weaker that *this*? It boggles the mind. How did they survive out in the wild?"

"It's a mystery, for sure."

"Mysteries upon mysteries…"

"Oh, whoop."

I quickly conjure a slime sword and slash behind myself, cleaving in two the beast that was coming after me.

"Splendid work," Beta says. She makes a sword as well and swings it downward.

A beast is charging at her head-on, but although her attack splits it clean down the middle, more and more of the black creatures are gathering by the moment.

"Looks like this place is their nest," I comment.

"It does, doesn't it? I suspect they start their day around sundown."

That would explain why the magic I sensed earlier was so faint.

We spend the next little while cleaning up the magical beasts as they try to attack us.

All in all, we end up killing about fifty of 'em.

Throughout the battle, I make sure to use my slime to shield myself so I don't get any blood on my clothes.

"It feels silly to even suggest, but… Is there a chance that here in Jappan, these creatures rule the ecosystem from atop the food chain?" Beta asks.

"It's…a definite possibility."

Trying to beat these bad boys without magic would be an uphill battle.

Even if you manage to wound them with conventional attacks, they can regenerate the damage in barely any time at all.

These magical beasts are hella weak, so a thousand rounds from a machine gun would probably be enough to leave them too wounded to regenerate, but at that point, it'd almost be more efficient to just try to get them to attack each other.

Over in our world, dealing with powerful magical beasts is a job for dark knights, and while regular knights do take on weaker magical beasts, they do it with magically enchanted swords.

Although these beasts are pretty feeble by our standards, it'd be no surprise if they were able to reign supreme over a world that hadn't developed magic.

"Master Shadow, I assume you've already noticed, but…"

"Hmm?"

"…I sense people."

Oh hey, yeah, someone just came into the hospital.

"Should we make contact?" Beta asks me.

“Good question… Let’s stay flexible and play it by ear.”

Akane Nishino arrives in the abandoned hospital with four teammates in tow.

Her black hair is elegant and tidy, and her eyes are a striking shade of red.

“This is where the three of them were searching before they went missing.”

“By all accounts, yes.”

Five days ago, three of their knights headed to this dilapidated hospital to investigate the beasts that had taken up nesting there.

The hospital is close to their base, Nishino University. A nest there could grow too large for them to handle if they didn’t deal with it.

The thing is, the knights never returned.

Akane pushed to launch a rescue mission, but her request was vetoed from on high. The base already had its hands full from investigating the other incident from the previous week, and they didn’t have the knights to spare. In the end, the hospital situation got put on the back burner.

Akane knows how slim the odds are that any of the knights are still alive.

At the same time, though, she can’t bring herself to abandon the people she’s fought shoulder to shoulder with.

The look in her eyes hardens. “Was that investigation really more important than people’s lives…?”

The person who opposed the rescue mission was a man researching magic—as well as Akane’s own brother.

“Akane…”

“Sorry, it’s nothing,” she replies. “We should hurry.”

For now, their top priority is confirming whether those three are alive or dead.

She would have liked to help earlier, but the security in the afternoons is too tight, so the only chance she has to act is at night.

Not even her brother would expect her to go out this late.

After all, night is when the beasts reign…

“Get ready for a fight. They’re here.”

When they walk through the hospital’s entrance, they’re hit with the cloying reek of death.

None of them waste a moment before drawing their weapons.

Most of them are armed with little more than kitchen knives, but Akane is equipped with a long katana.

Her weapon shines as she runs magic through it.

The most efficient way to kill a beast is by slashing it with a bladed weapon imbued with magic, as projectile weapons lose their magical charge too quickly as they fly away from the user's body.

"Let's go."

Night is when beasts are at their strongest. A single one of them is enough to give an average knight a run for their money.

The group proceeds with utmost caution.

Their footsteps echo through the ruined hospital's flashlight-illuminated hallways.

The beasts have already noticed their incursion, no doubt.

Any moment now, they're going to leap out and—

Drip.

"Huh?"

Some sort of sticky liquid drips down on them.

"What is this stuff…?"

"Look out! Above you!"

It's drool from the beast clinging to the ceiling.

"AHHHHHHHH!"

The beast descends, smothering the knight with its body.

"They're behind us, too!"

"W-we're surrounded!"

Another beast leaps out of the darkness at Akane, but she dodges to the side and brings her katana down on its back.

It lets out a horrid cry and writhes in pain.

Then, she whirls around and mows down the beast that landed on the knight.

"Are you okay?!"

"M-my shoulder… It's b-bleeding pretty bad…"

He isn't in immediate mortal danger, but the wound is deep.

"Everyone, be calm! Form up with the wall to your backs!"

Akane pushes the wounded soldier up against the wall and swings her katana while protecting him with her body.

Her panicking squadmates slowly begin getting back into formation.

Somehow or other, they manage to pull it together.

"HRAAAAAH!"

Then, Akane abandons cooperation and takes a big step forward.

Her blade glows bright as she pours huge amounts of magic into it.

That's when—

"Wh-whoa."

"Akane's so amazing…"

Her slash bisects three beasts clean through, ending the fight right there and then.

She wipes the blood splatters off herself and inspects her defeated foes.

There are seven of them in all, five of which Akane downed herself.

She goes around and deals the coup de grâce to each of the beasts. They're so resilient that average knights have to hack away at them for ages to actually kill one.

If things had gone even a little bit worse, she and her squad could have gotten wiped out. That just goes to show how terrifying beasts are at night.

Once she's done killing them all, Akane breathes a sigh of relief. "Is everyone all right?"

"I-I'm good."

"Me too. Just a few scratches."

"They got a pretty good chunk outta my arm."

"My shoulderrrrr…"

Even that short battle took quite a toll on them. Pressing on would be a dangerous ordeal.

"You—you're in charge of first aid," Akane says.

"Y-you got it."

"But what about you, Akane?"

"I'm going to go check upstairs."

Their fight just then should have left the ground floor clear of beasts.

If Akane leaves the others here, she'll be free to explore the rest of the building and fight to her heart's content.

"Y-you can't! We can't let you go alone!"

"Yeah! We're not about to abandon the Savior!"

"Cut that out." Akane silences them, her voice as cold as ice. "I'm… I'm no savior."

"B-but you have that special power…"

"And *everyone* calls you the Savior! They say that you're going to save us all!"

Akane averts her eyes, unable to endure her squadmates' imploring gazes.

Sure, she has more magic than the average knight.

And sure, she's used that power to kill tons of beasts and save tons of lives.

But that's not why people call her that.

It's all because of those rumors her brother started. He just wants to use her and her power as a means to manipulate the desperate.

She's not strong enough to save the world.

However…Akane can't bring herself to tell them that.

"I'm just doing what I can," she says noncommittally.

"We know that. It's why we follow you."

"And we're not gonna leave you on your own!"

"…Have it your way," she replies.

Akane and the others carry their wounded and head toward the stairs.

Each step they take shaves away a little more of Akane's resolve. Then, the thick smell of blood hits her, and she stops in her tracks.

"Wh-what is this…?"

Their flashlights reveal a pool of red blood down at the end of the corridor. The pool extends down past the bend in the hallway.

She can tell by the scent and the color that it isn't human blood.

It's beast blood.

And it's not just one beast's worth of blood, either. It would have taken tons of them to shed that much blood.

They shine their flashlights around the corner.

"Ahh!"

One of her squadmates lets out a noise halfway between a gasp and a scream, and even Akane can't help but recoil a step.

It's like looking at a lake of blood.

The ceiling and walls are dyed just as red as the floor, and the blood is accompanied by floating chunks of dead beast.

There're so many corpses it seems impossible to even count them.

"What could've happened here?"

"Wh-what the…?"

"You're kidding…"

Killing this many beasts would require mobilizing a squad of knights several dozen strong.

What local group even has that many knights at their disposal?

As far as Akane knows, neither her own Messiah nor any of the neighboring factions have anything resembling that kind of man power.

Who did this? And why?

Suddenly, Akane thinks of a possibility.

"…Could an apex beast have done this?"

"What? An apex beast?!"

"From what I hear, an apex beast might have been involved with the incident my brother is looking into, as well."

"……."

Her squadmates go as white as sheets.

There aren't any factions in the vicinity with the power to pull something like this off, so the odds that this was done by something other than a human—like an apex beast—are exceedingly high.

Not all beasts in this world are the same.

Over ten different subspecies have already been identified, but one of them in particular—the incredibly powerful variant dubbed the apex beast—is responsible for countless dead knights and destroyed bases.

Apex beasts are like fear given flesh.

"Akane, w-we should get out of here, now."

"There's no way it's still around," she replies. *If it was, we'd all be long dead*, she tells herself. "And we still have to investigate. If an apex beast really did do this, then we need all the information we can get."

"Y-yes, ma'am…"

The group timidly gets to work.

“These ones look like they were torn apart by fangs, but…it doesn’t make sense. These cuts are too clean.”

“It has sharp claws, then,” Akane notes.

“Th-these ones have been crushed flat. Oh, God, that’s gross.”

“Tremendous strength,” she adds.

“Th-these ones have parts all over the place… It’s like they were shredded to bits.”

“And a nasty cruel streak,” she concludes.

It’s one piece of bad news after another.

Even Akane has to admit that this apex beast’s power is off the charts.

All of the beasts there were defeated in a single strike.

Akane’s taken out a couple apex beasts in her day, but this thing is clearly far stronger than anything she’s ever encountered.

“We need a name for this new apex beast,” she says. “I suggest ‘the Brute.’”

“Looking at this mess, I’d say that’s more than appropriate.”

Suddenly, another squadmate calls over. “There’s someone here! We found survivors!”

“What?!” Akane yelps.

She had all but given up on finding the missing trio alive.

A moment later, though, her newly reignited hopes are dashed.

The people lying facedown in the hallway are strangers she’s never seen.

“Who are they?”

“Beats me, I just found them lying here. I think they’re unconscious.”

There are two of them.

The first is a boy with black hair.

He’s wearing jeans and a hoodie and carrying a backpack on his back. He’s the kind of generic refugee you could find just about anywhere.

“You think maybe their base got destroyed recently or something?”

“With an apex beast roaming around, I’d say that seems likely.”

Human strongholds falling to beast attacks has become a sadly common occurrence.

Whenever that happens, the residents are forced to search for new bases to join as refugees.

If a refugee can use magic, they’ll be accepted just about anywhere with open arms.

However, it’s all too common for refugees who aren’t so useful to get turned away at the gates, and even if they are allowed in, they’re often forced to do backbreaking manual labor to earn their keep. These days, nobody ever has enough supplies to go around.

Akane wonders if Nishino University will even take him.

“A-Akane, look at the girl! Look at her hair! It’s *silver*!”

“What?!”

Much to everyone’s surprise, the refugee girl’s hair is a beautiful shade of silver.

Akane removes the girl's hat to get a better look.

Sure enough, it's silver down to the roots.

"Could she really be an Awakened…?"

There are some knights called the Awakened whose magic is leagues stronger than anyone else's.

Akane, with her red eyes, numbers among their ranks.

Those are the two notable features of the Awakened—their tremendous magic, and their physical idiosyncrasies.

In Akane's case, her eyes turned red, but her anomaly is on the lighter side. Some people, like this girl, see their hair color change, and other unfortunate souls even experience horrible whole-body mutations.

"And look at her ears, Akane. They're so long."

The girl's ears are long and pointed, almost like an elf's out of a fairy tale.

"That settles it. She's an Awakened, for sure."

"A-an Awakened…"

Akane's squadmates shrink back from the girl, almost as though they're scared of her.

It's not uncommon for the changes the Awakened go through to affect their personalities.

There's no shortage of Awakeneds who use their incredible magic to kill people and end up having to be destroyed.

Those like Akane, who don't have any visible changes to their personality, are in the minority. That's why so many call her the Savior.

"Don't worry. She was together with the boy, so she shouldn't be dangerous."

"O-oh yeah, good point. You're right, she's probably fine."

The squad members' expressions lighten a little.

As much as people fear the Awakened, they also seek their power.

"Are we going to take them both back with us?"

"Obviously," Akane replies.

"But our supplies are thin as it is. We could leave the boy behind and just take the—"

"Now listen here."

For a brief moment, Akane loses it.

However, seeing the unease that flashes across her squadmates' faces helps her return to her senses.

"He might be a relative of hers. What do you plan on telling her when she wakes up?"

"Y-you're right! We wouldn't want to upset her and risk having her leave!"

"Yeah, let's take them both and get out of here!"

Akane can feel her heart grow colder as she looks at her squadmates' forced smiles.

However, she can't really blame them.

Everyone has their hands full just worrying about themselves.

The only reason she's able to show more compassion than they can is the security her strong magic offers her. At least, that's what she tells herself to try to dampen her displeasure.

"Let's go."

Akane hoists the girl up onto her back and leaves the boy for the others to handle. She feels the girl's gentle warmth spread across her body.

She really is pretty.

She's probably still high school–aged. Akane remembers high school. She'll never forget that happy youth she had.

Whenever things get tough nowadays, she always reminisces about back then and fantasizes that he'll come and save her again.

She knows that'll never happen, though.

After all, he died ages ago.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
as it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

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Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Sneaking Around in Japan, Just Like the Old Days!!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Sneaking Around in Japan, Just Like the Old Days!!

After that, Akane and her squad find the three knights' bodies and return to Nishino University.

The gate to the base is locked tight.

Night is when the guards are at their most alert.

After all, that's when the beasts are active.

The bulwark's perimeter is illuminated by bright lights, and keen-eyed knights patrol atop it all through the night. The purpose of the tall walls is twofold: to stop beasts from getting in, and to make it easy to sound the alarm if any draw near.

This day, though, what the guards find isn't a beast—it's Akane and her squad.

"And that's all you have to report?"

The first one to come meet her is her brother, Akira Nishino. He's wearing glasses and a lab coat and has an anxious, puckered-up look on his face.

"Yes. I take full responsibility for what happened."

Akane's just finished handing over her wounded squadmates to the medical team and telling her brother what went down.

She's the one who took a bunch of knights off-base at night without permission. She still thinks her brother was in the wrong, but she has no intention of trying to avoid the consequences for what she's done.

"That's not for you to decide."

"The others were only following my orders."

"Really?"

"Really."

Akira gives her answer a twisted grin. "I'm going to all the others next and asking them what happened, too. It'll be interesting to see how they remember it—whether they were obeying your orders, or acting on their own volition."

"……."

Akane didn't give her squadmates a single order. To the contrary, she'd been planning on going in solo. They were the ones who forced her to let them come along.

"Giving me false testimony isn't going to do you any favors, you know."

Akane hangs her head.

“Still, I’m not a monster. I hear you brought back two refugees, and that one of them was an Awakened.”

“…That’s right.”

“Where are they? Take me to them.”

“They’re unconscious. We should wait for them to wake up and get their bearings before we—”

“Take me to them, now.”

“…Yes, sir.”

Akane left the two refugees in the infirmary in the base’s residential area.

Like every base, their residential area is wildly overcrowded. Even in this section, where Akane’s room is, there are people conspicuously sleeping in the hallways.

“They’re in here,” Akane says.

When she enters the room, she’s greeted by a chipper voice from within. “Akane, is that you? Perfect timing. One of the kids just—”

A woman comes over wearing a lab coat and a friendly smile.

When she spots Akira standing behind Akane, though, the words get caught in her throat.

“It’s okay, Dr. Yuuka. You can tell him.”

On Akane’s urging, the lab coat–clad Yuuka hesitantly goes on. “The boy just woke up.”

There are two beds in the room. One of them has a boy on it, the other has a girl.

The girl’s eyes are still closed fast, but the boy is sitting up and looking their way.

“U-um… Where am I?” he asks nervously.

“You’re at Nishino University. We found you passed out at the hospital and took you in,” Yuuka says gently. “How much do you remember?”

“The hospital…? Why was I at the hospital…?”

Yuuka lowers her voice to a hush. “He seems to be suffering from memory problems.”

“Is he okay?” Akane asks.

“It’s probably temporary, caused by overexposure to magic.”

“He might have seen the Brute firsthand,” Akane theorizes.

“The apex beast from your report?” Akira says. “If that’s true, you need to get his memories back, now.”

Yuuka gives him a weak nod, then turns back to the boy. “Can you remember anything? What’s your name?”

“My name…? It’s, uh…it’s Minoru.”

When the boy named Minoru says his name, it doesn’t seem to come easily to him.

Upon hearing it, Akane finds herself reminded of *him*.

The boy in front of her even kind of reminds her of him.

She can’t put her finger on why, but he does.

“What about your last name? Do you remember it?”

“It’s Kage—err, no, I can’t remember…”

“What about the girl you were with?”

“The girl…” The boy’s eyes go wide. “Wait, you mean Natsume?! Is Natsume okay?!”

“Her name’s Natsume, then? Don’t worry, she’s right there next to you.”

Minoru breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God… If my little sister got hurt, I dunno what I’d do.”

“Ah, so she’s your sister. What can you tell us about her?”

“She, um… Well, uh…”

“It’s okay, we already know. She’s an Awakened, right?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, yeah! She’s got pointy ears and silver hair…”

“But she’s a good kid, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, for sure! It’s just, the thing is, she can’t talk.”

“Really…? That must be so difficult.”

The fact that the girl lost her ability to speak means that her mutation must have been pretty severe.

The boy must have had a hell of a time trying to get through to her.

“I’m Yuuka, the doctor here. As far as her care goes, I intend to take full —”

“I’ll look after her personally,” Akira says, cutting her off and speaking to Minoru directly.

“W-wait…who’re you?”

“I’m Akira Nishino, one of the people in charge here. I’m also a researcher by trade, and I spend my days working as hard as I can to research magic and the Awakened so I can help people.”

“I—I see…”

“Your sister’s had it rough because of her mutation, and that’s something I can appreciate better than most. My sister’s an Awakened, too.”

“Really?”

“Can you trust us with your sister? I swear to you, I’ll do everything in my power to help her talk again.”

“I—I dunno… I’d have to ask her first.”

“Ask her? I thought she couldn’t talk.”

“Oh, uh… Right, she can’t talk, but we still manage to communicate through gestures and stuff.”

“I see. So, she’s retained a certain degree of her sanity…”

Akira sinks into thought. His expression is mixed.

“Brother dear,” Akane says, “she hasn’t even woken up yet, and the boy is clearly still getting his bearings. Maybe it would be better if you came back later and asked them then.”

“You’re right,” he replies, then turns back to Minoru. “I’m sure this is all a bit sudden for you. For tonight, just rest easy. You’re guests of Messiah now.”

“Th-thank you for being so welcoming.”

After gently comforting the boy, he takes Akane and leaves the room.

Once they’re out, he laughs coldly. “What a naive child.”

“What do you plan on doing with them?”

Akira doesn’t answer. He just lets out an ominous laugh and heads for the schoolhouse.

Cid’s voice echoes through the dimly lit infirmary. “The room’s clear.”

It’s been a little while since the earlier conversation, and the lady doctor has left, too, meaning that Beta and Cid are now alone.

“Master Shadow…”

When Beta opens her eyes, she finds her lord sitting on the windowsill and looking up at the moon. She can see the anguish lurking just below his expression’s surface. Those ebony eyes of his are fixed on the distant future; he’s surely weaving elaborate plans in his head.

“I can’t believe you’ve learned to speak this world’s language already.”

Out of everything that’s happened so far, his earlier conversation with the locals is what surprised Beta the most.

His learning to read the language in just a few short hours came as a shock, sure, but who could have even dreamed that he would be able to figure out the pronunciations as well and actually be able to put that knowledge into practice?

“I listened to their conversations while we were pretending to be unconscious and pieced together their meaning through a combination of the sounds they made, the way they moved their mouths, and the expressions they made. It’s a simple trick.”

Shadow’s nonchalance toward his own feat makes Beta’s awed gaze grow even more fervent.

He may have listened to a conversation, but it was only a short one. Plus, Beta could tell from the locals’ reactions just how absurdly proficient her lord’s pronunciation was.

The feat he’s performed—arriving so directly at the answer to understanding a language’s underlying logic, even going so far as to master its phonetics—can only be described as divine.

“I’ll be going as Minoru in this world, and I told them you’re called Natsume. Our backstory is that you’re my little sister.”

“We’re siblings?”

“I figured it’d play better that way. Also, I told them you can’t talk.”

“Well, I technically can’t, so that works out nicely as well. Though I’ll be doing my best to rectify that, of course.”

“Nah, I think you should stay the way you are. I just feel like that’s a better route.”

“Oh, I see… Then in that case, I’ll remain mute.”

Clearly, he wants her to continue *feigning* being unable to talk as a way to gather information by making the other side let their guard down. Using her muteness to their advantage is a clever trick.

For that trick to work, however, she needs to learn the local language as fast as possible.

“Now, here’s the plan moving forward. I want to use this base as a place to gather information from.”

“I see, so intel gathering is the name of the game…”

In other words, he’s saying that he came to this world in order to gain power.

What kind of power, though?

Easy—this world’s knowledge and technology.

Compared to their old world, this civilization is far more advanced.

Taking its fruits back with them will allow the Shadow Garden to progress by leaps and bounds. To the Shadow Garden, that’s the most valuable kind of power there is. That’s what he wants it for. Beta is sure of it.

“Now, my suggestion is that we act independently,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“Because Natsume’s ears and hair color are different, they’re under the mistaken impression that you have a disease.”

“Ah, of course.”

He must have used his masterful conversational skills to engender that misunderstanding. Now, they’ll be able to gather information from two places at once.

Joining an existing community is the best way to get information fast.

Thanks to how skillfully he stayed flexible and played things by ear, he was able to get them accepted into this one without anyone suspecting a thing.

Now, all they have to do is milk these people for all the intel and tech know-how they’re worth, then head back home.

As far as the heading home part goes, they simply have to trace Mordred’s magic. He merged with Ragnarok, and he’s definitely linked back to their original world.

Once they find him, they’ll be able to reactivate the Black Rose. Beta is sure of it.

“Now, one of the big shots here wants to examine Natsume’s illness himself.”

“Understood. So that’s what’s going on…”

In short, he’s telling her that her job is to place herself right in the heart of the community and steal information from there.

“Yup, that’s exactly it. Just remember to pretend to be sick twenty-four seven. Make sure you don’t go wandering around at all.”

“Of course. I would never blow my cover like that.”

He’s saying that she needs to make sure her acting is impeccable so their hosts underestimate her. That way, she’ll be able to proactively use her position to steal the information they need.

“This Akira Nishino guy is gonna come by as early as tomorrow to pick you up.”

“Understood. How do you want me to handle my reports?”

“I’ll come get them in person.”

In other words, there’s no fixed schedule, and he’s leaving the details up to her discretion.

“As you wish.”

“Cool, cool.”

With a composed look on his face, her lord takes the nearby pitcher and pours himself a cup of water.

They’re in an unfamiliar place—an unfamiliar world, even—and yet he doesn’t seem nervous or tense in the slightest. It’s like he already thinks of this place as his second homeland.

The only explanation for that must be his unshakable self-confidence.

Her lord is confident that no matter the time, place, or situation, he'll be able to overcome anything that stands in his way.

Beta hides beneath her blanket and jots this moment down in *The Chronicles of Master Shadow* so she'll never forget it.

Tomorrow, the information gathering mission will begin in earnest.

However, it took her lord but a scant few hours to master this world's language, gather the essential intel, and come up with the perfect plan. He even managed to insert Beta right in the heart of this local community.

It'll only take them a few days to strip their unwitting hosts bare of any information worth taking.

Beta is certain of it.

A new morning has arrived, and hot damn, how I've waited for it!

As soon as the sun comes up, I immediately pawn Beta off on Akira Nishino and suck in a big lungful of the brisk air.

That should do a pretty good job of restricting her movements.

It'll also inhibit her ability to study Japanese, and all my lies will be safe for that much longer. Now, I just have to use this time I've bought to find a way to get back to our original world.

"Heh-heh-heh… It's the perfect plan."

The question is, how long will it take her to learn the language? I mean, she *has* always been a smart one.

I wanna say…six months, probably?

I should keep my estimate conservative to be safe, though, so let's go with three.

With three months to work with, I'm sure I can find a lead on how to get us back home. The fact that we got here in the first place means there's gotta be something somewhere linking back to our world.

For the time being, however, as I'm gathering intel on the black hole and any powerful magic I can find…I don't see why I can't have myself a little fun here in Japan.

I'm, like, pretty much certain that this is the world I lived in during my old life.

It's got my house—destroyed as it is—and it even has my old classmate, Akane Nishino. When I saw her just now, she looked like she was about twenty.

That means it's been a couple years since I died here. Something happened during those years, and whatever it was, it was big and magicky.

I can feel it in my bones. Something really, really fun is afoot.

I think it's time for a certain almighty jet-black badass from another world to make his appearance here in the tatters of Japan.

As a profound grin spreads across my face, I hear a knock on the door.

“Good morning, Minoru.”

“I—I remember you. From last night…”

“Oh, right, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Akane Nishino, a knight here at Messiah.”

The infirmary door swings open. Akane Nishino is standing behind it dressed in a uniform I remember fondly.

She’s got black hair and red eyes. Her eyes used to be similarly black, but I guess something magicky must’ve happened to turn them red. Dunno what, though.

As for the outfit, though, she’s wearing a white blazer, a checkered skirt, and black tights. It’s the uniform from my alma mater, Sakurazaka High School. She was dressed the same way last night, too.

“That uniform…”

“What, this? It’s Sakurazaka High School’s. In Messiah, all the knights wear this. You know how police officers wear uniforms? It’s the same idea.”

She does a little twirl.

“Oh, huh. I guess my memories are still pretty jumbled…”

“I don’t blame you. Just take it slow and remember what you can, okay? If there’s stuff you’re confused about, you can ask me anything.”

“Thanks, that means a lot. Actually, I did have something I wanted to ask.”

“Of course. Before you do, though…”

She smiles kindly.

“…what would you say to some breakfast?”

There’s a big group of people gathered around one of the university’s pavilions and waiting in line for food to be handed out.

The two of us join the back of the line.

“Surprised?” Akane asks.

“What? Oh, for sure.”

I dunno what it is I’m supposed to be surprised about.

“It really is amazing, just how many people Messiah is able to feed. We generate electricity on-site, so we’re able to use cutting-edge equipment to produce food,” she says with a touch of pride. “Because of how peaceful and consistent things are here, we’re the most populous base in the region.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Although that prosperity is a double-edged sword.”

“Oh?”

“We don’t have enough knights to go around. Each of us is in charge of protecting over a hundred residents. It’s stretching us thin, and we’ve already started suffering more casualties. That’s where she comes in.”

“Who?”

“It was…Natsume, right? I saw her over in my brother’s lab this morning.”

“Oh, yeah, I figured he would be the best person to treat her.”

“Ah… I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry about what?”

Akane goes quiet for a moment, then shakes her head. “It’s nothing. Just leave her to us. I’ll do everything I can to help her.”

“Thanks, I’m counting on you.”

Counting on you to keep her on a short leash, that is.

“My brother is… He’s an amazing researcher. He’s the one who got the generator and all the equipment up and running. But those same facilities make us a target for other bases.”

“Oh, makes sense.”

“That’s why we’re in such a hurry to expand our combat assets,” she says quietly so as not to be heard.

The two of us finally get our food and head over to a nearby clearing on a lawn.

“By the way, about that question,” I say as we sit down and start eating.

“Of course, ask away.”

Our breakfast is a brown rice and vegetable gruel seasoned with what tastes like miso. It’s healthy, but it’s definitely not winning any awards.

Still, given how proud Akane sounded when she talked about it, I guess this is a pretty hearty meal by the world’s new standards.

“My memories are pretty jumbled up, and there’s a bunch of stuff I don’t remember, so I was hoping you could give me a quick refresher, starting from the very beginning.”

“What do you mean, the beginning?”

“Like, the day Japan got like this.”

“Oh, you mean the event three years ago?”

Interesting. So, that’s how long it’s been.

“Yeah. Just the general rundown is fine.”

“Sure. Now, I’m sure you remember how three years ago, the beasts appeared out of nowhere and turned the world on its head overnight. Our existing weapons did little more than slow them down, and over the next year, the human race’s numbers plummeted. People throw around numbers like us being at a tenth or a hundredth of our original population, but nobody knows the exact figures anymore. But during that same time, we were slowly learning.”

She finishes her gruel and puts down her bowl.

I’m still only halfway through mine.

“The beasts are nocturnal. During the day, they sleep in nests. Once we realized that, we started getting things done during the daytime and spending nights keeping watch. At first, we were afraid of attacks twenty-four seven, but now we know we don’t have to worry about that. Little by little, we amassed more knowledge and power.”

When she says “beasts,” I guess she’s talking about those weak magical beasts.

It makes sense; most magical beasts are nocturnal. Not all of them, though, so she should probably still be careful.

“From what I understand, the first ones to discover magic were a group of researchers overseas. Most of the old communication methods don’t work anymore, so it was hard to verify anything, but the word was that there were people in foreign countries called knights who could fight back against the beasts. Once those rumors spread here, Japan started researching magic as well. Back then, we would’ve tried anything.”

Sounds like things around here got real interesting real fast.

Those two magic lights I saw right before I died might’ve been a portent of the beasts that were about to arrive. In fact, I’m sure they were.

“After that, about a year ago, Japan got its first knight. Her golden hair was an oddity for a Japanese person, and people looked to her as a beacon of hope and called her the Original Knight. But it wasn’t long before they found those hopes betrayed. As an Awakened, her tremendous power took a similarly tremendous toll on her personality. Eventually, she slaughtered Arcadia’s people and disappeared.”

For some reason, Akane’s voice is trembling.

I shovel down the rest of my gruel. Breakfast of champions, baby.

“Arcadia was a base hailed as the last true utopia in Japan. Scholars gathered there from all over, countless knights became Awakeneds there, and tons of people journeyed there to seek shelter. The whole reason it was able to exist was because of the huge throngs of beasts the Original Knight killed, but at the same time, that was what made losing Arcadia such a blow. It was like we lost our only paradise.”

She clutches her shoulders, almost as though she’s scared of something.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m… I’m fine.”

Well, if you say so.

I’m not sure I’m following all this stuff about the “Awakened,” but I guess it’s probably similar to the possessed.

“Once we were robbed of our hope, humanity became more and more selfish, and battles started breaking out between bases. Knights were kidnapped, supplies were stolen, and lives were lost by the legion. Now, Japan is in ruins.”

Eh, I doubt any of the other countries fared much better.

“From what I understand, my brother is a survivor from Arcadia.”

“…You aren’t sure?”

“I don’t remember much from back then. Apparently, my magic wreaked havoc with my memories,” she says gloomily. “Our family was supposed to all be here at the university, but he went off to Arcadia for his research. That’s why he knows so much more than everyone else about knights and the Awakened. Everything he’s doing is to help people… At least, I want to

believe it is. But the thing is, all his research is so complicated, no one understands any of it but him…”

“Oh, man…”

I do my best to look awed.

“I’m sorry, Minoru. I know talking your ear off about this stuff isn’t going to fix anything.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t know why, but it feels like I’ve known you forever. I get this sort of nostalgic calm when I’m with you, and I start thinking about the past… It’s weird, right?” She gives me a sad smile. “What about you? Did any of that help jog your memory?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah, I feel like stuff might be starting to come back…”

“If you don’t remember, no worries, but could you tell me what happened to the base you two were at before this? Was it attacked by beasts? Or by people…?”

“Rrgh… My head…!”

“D-don’t push yourself!”

Thanks to my “memories being messed up,” I don’t have to “remember” the answers to questions I’d rather not answer. No point in letting her kindness go to waste, right?

“It’s okay, you can take it as slow as you need to.”

She rubs my back as I clutch my head in feigned concentration.

The rest of our conversation is all harmless and uninspired, and eventually she has to go do knight stuff, so I head back to the infirmary.

“Where did you run off to?!”

When I get back, I find Dr. Yuuka waiting for me in a huff, with her cheeks puffed out. I tell her what happened and apologize.

“That Akane… She should’ve told me. I was worried sick! There’s a stampede coming up soon, so everyone’s rushing around in a tizzy. It’s dangerous out there.”

While she talks, she checks my temperature and blood pressure and stuff.

“Uh, what’s a stampede?”

“You’ve forgotten so much… There’s nothing wrong with your body, so your memories should come back as soon as the magical aftereffects wear off. The simplest way to explain a stampede is that it’s when a bunch of beasts go on a rampage.”

“But why?”

“You know how packs of beasts come together to build nests, right? That’s where they breed to increase their population. Now, once their

population crosses a certain threshold, they start rampaging. We think they do it to split up the pack once it gets too big."

"So, what happens during these rampages?"

"They start gathering food and making preparations to build a new nest. And by food, I mean us. Once a beast starts stampeding, the only way to make it give up is to kill it. That's what makes stampedes so dangerous."

"…So in other words, there's a nest nearby that's so big it's going to have a stampede?"

"That's exactly right," Dr. Yuuka says gravely. She spreads out a map. It's covered in marks and dates. "This is the hospital we found you two at. It was the newest nest in the area, so it's lucky we were able to destroy it before it got out of hand."

With that, she draws a slash through the mark on the hospital and writes yesterday's date and the word *"destroyed"* next to it.

"Wow," I say. "There's so many of them."

"That there are. There were originally twenty-nine nests in the area around Nishino University, and we've only been able to destroy fourteen of them."

"Meaning, there's still fifteen left…"

"As you can see, we've dealt with most of the ones right next to us. Those are the ones we have the easiest time finding before they get too big."

"What happens if they do?"

Dr. Yuuka shakes her head. "Messiah doesn't have the man power to take out larger nests on our own. We have to team up with other bases to destroy them, and even then, doing so comes with its own problems. Because of how far the larger nests tend to be from our base, sending knights out to destroy them leaves Messiah underdefended. That makes us vulnerable to beast attacks and raids from enemy bases…"

"Ah, that makes sense. And at the same time, sending out a smaller force would defeat the point."

She nods. "After you head a certain distance away from the base, you start seeing huge nests all over the place. Take a look at these dates. Seven more of them have popped up in this past year alone."

"Sounds like you want to get them while they're small."

"Our knights do what they can to destroy smaller nests they come across on their patrols, but there's only so many patrols we can even send out with our current numbers. And it's not like the other bases are doing any better." She heaves a heavy sigh. "But it's not the far-off nests we need to worry about, it's the nearby ones. When stampedes start at the distant ones, there's a good chance the rampaging beasts won't even come Messiah's way."

"You're saying they might go after other bases instead. Heck, they might even just head off into the distance."

"That's right, and that's why *this* nest is such a problem."

Dr. Yuuka points at a spot on the map. It's a spot that has a lot of memories for me.

"Sakurazaka High School…," I mutter.

"Right here, less than a mile from the university, is the biggest nest in the area. There's a stampede there every three months, and whenever that happens, the beasts always come straight after us."

"Ah, so just because things are good inside Messiah doesn't mean that the area around it is actually safe."

"That nest is a nightmare for us. We've tried getting nearby bases to help us destroy it, but we've never gotten anyone to agree."

"Well, sure. They know that if the high school nest stampedes, it's just gonna attack Messiah. There's no reason for them to want to help."

"We've tried offering all sorts of different deals, but nobody's ever bitten. That's why Messiah needs new combat assets so badly. Every stampede, we lose knights. Sometimes even dozens of them… And this time, we might have an apex beast to worry about, too."

"A what?"

"It's a subspecies that's far more powerful than the average beast. We've found evidence of one in the area recently. We suspect that all the traces have been left by the same apex beast, and so Akane's named it the Brute."

"The Brute, huh?"

So what're we talking about here, like, a kinda strong magical beast?

"If the Brute takes part in this upcoming stampede, we're going to lose a lot more than just a few knights this time. People are terrified that Messiah will eventually run out of knights altogether and get wiped out. And because they're afraid, every time the stampede rolls around…"

Suddenly, I hear angry voices and violent noises coming from outside the room.

This isn't one or two people being rowdy. There's gotta be at least a dozen people involved.

"…there are fights. Sometimes they're so bad, people die. Make sure you don't leave the room until knights come around. If it weren't for the stampedes, Messiah would be flourishing. We could even become a second Arcadia. That's why things are usually so peaceful here. We have our share of problems, sure, but people know when to start listening to reason."

The fighting outside doesn't seem to be stopping. In fact, it's growing in intensity.

Is this melee gonna devolve into a one hundred–man brawl?!

Right as the urge to barge in on it threatens to overtake me, I hear Akane's voice off in the distance.

"It sounds like Akane got there, so things should settle down now," Dr. Yuuka says with a sigh of relief. "Now, it's time for me to go out there and treat the wounded."

"Be careful."

She rolls up her sleeves and leaves the infirmary.

I roll up mine and spread out the map.

“Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch a tiger by the toe…”

The sun begins setting, casting the sky a brilliant shade of vermilion.

Akane looks up at it and sighs. She’s finally done with work.

She’d had the day shift, which is divided into two main responsibilities—patrolling the outside of the base, and patrolling the inside.

The former mainly involves making the rounds and catching new beast nests before they grow out of control, but there are sometimes other things the knights are asked to investigate as well. Apparently, Akira told the outside team to look into some potential apex tracks. Akane wasn’t with that squad, though, so she doesn’t know the specifics.

Today, she was in charge of patrolling inside the base, a task that usually involves breaking up fights like a police officer would. Normally, it’s dead easy.

However, the days before a stampede are hardly normal. A huge fight broke out that morning, and there were smaller kerfuffles all throughout the afternoon.

Plus, starting tomorrow, she’s going to be on the dangerous night shift.

She gives her arms a big stretch. “I’m so tired…”

“Good work today.”

She hears a voice call out to her from behind. She turns and finds an attractive woman in a lab coat.

“Dr. Yuuka…”

“Things were pretty rough today, huh?”

“For you, too, I bet. A lot of people got hurt back there.”

“We’re just lucky nobody died. If you hadn’t gotten here as fast as you did, I don’t know if that still would’ve been true.”

The two of them exchange weary smiles.

“Now, about our friend…”

“Who?”

“Minoru. I spent most of the day looking after him, and physically speaking, he’s fine. All that’s left is to wait for his memories to come back.”

“Oh, that’s so good to hear.”

“Now, I can keep him in the infirmary tonight, but he’s going to have to go tomorrow. Today’s fight left the infirmary at capacity, and there just isn’t room for him to stay.”

“Ah, right. I’ll go ask the Facilities team to set him up with a room.”

Yuuka frowns awkwardly. “Actually, about that…”

“What’s up?”

“Minoru’s memories are still jumbled, and there are a lot of things he doesn’t seem to understand. The thing is, we still need to teach him about Messiah’s rules, and once he gets settled in, he’ll need to start working. I don’t know how well he’s going to be able to get by without someone looking after him. That would normally be my job, but what with the fight today and how busy the infirmary is…”

“Oh, you’re right…”

Now that she thinks about it, it’s obvious. Things are peaceful in Messiah, sure, but a boy with amnesia is still going to run into a lot of problems, especially with a stampede right around the corner.

His face flashes through her mind, and she gets an idea.

“I’ll take care of Minoru.”

“You will?”

“Sure. There’s plenty of room at my place.”

“Wait, you actually plan on cohabitating with him? You know Minoru’s a guy, right?”

“He’s what, fifteen? He’s a kid.”

“You’re only twenty.”

“Sure, and that makes me an adult. Plus, I’m a knight. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You’re actually serious about this. Well, I’m sure you know what you’re doing…,” Yuuka says defeatedly.

Even Akane herself isn’t quite sure why she’s so eager to look after him. It would be far more logical to ask one of her male knight colleagues to take Minoru in instead.

For some reason, though, she wants to have him by her side.

“He’s all yours, then. I’ll keep him in the infirmary for tonight, and you can come pick him up in the morning.”

“I guess I should probably go clean up my place, huh?”

The two of them part ways with a smile.

It’s already pretty dark, so Akane quickens her step.

It doesn’t do her any good.

“That was some interesting stuff back there.”

A large man strides out from behind a nearby building.

Akane grimaces. “Vice Commander Saejima… Good work today, sir.”

Yuudai Saejima narrows his steely eyes and grins. “Hey, whoa, don’t get all formal and stuffy with me. We go way back, you and I. Same high school, same class…”

Yuudai’s physique is tough and bulky, and though his face resembles a gorilla’s, she’s told that people find him quite handsome. Akane doesn’t see the appeal herself, but by all accounts he’s the hottest guy in Gorillaville.

Back when he was in Sakurazaka High School, he was a regular badass in judo club and even went to nationals. Akane was his classmate at the time, but even back then, she never much cared for him.

No, that’s selling it short. She despises him and always has.

The thing she hates more than anything is the way it always feels like he's trying to undress her with his eyes.

"You're still my superior, sir."

"C'mon, hon, don't be like that."

He thumps her shoulder in an overly familiar way.

It gives her the heebie-jeebies.

As awful as he is, he's still the vice commander of Messiah's knight order, which means he outranks her. He's also a skilled knight, and not counting Akane, he's one of the strongest people in Messiah.

"So, I heard you picked up some guy last night. All the knights are talking about it."

"I'm off duty, so I'll be taking my leave now."

"Hey, not so fast. I'm here on business. You did good, grabbing that silver-haired girl. A new Awakened is gonna make a good addition to our roster. But you shoulda left the boy. You know as well as anyone how up to our eyeballs we knights are. Don't go making more work for us."

"I know we don't have enough knights to go around, but surely a single boy isn't going to make or break us."

"Hey! Remember what you just said about me being your superior? Don't talk back to me."

Yuudai squeezes Akane's shoulder tightly.

"…Yes, sir."

"That attitude of yours is a problem, hon. Sure, a single dude isn't gonna make a big difference. But what if everyone else starts following your lead and taking in stragglers? Pretty irresponsible of you not to realize what a big deal one guy can be, 'Savior.'" It feels like he's trying to peer right through her face. She hates his ugly mug so much. "You ignored your orders last night and went and got a bunch of our knights injured. You need to shape your ass up. Shit like this is why you'll never make vice commander."

"Who says I even want a promotion?"

"I *said*, quit talking back to me." Yuudai pulls Akane toward him, almost like he's hugging her.

"Let go of me…"

"Think of this as a disciplinary action. One of my problem knights picked up some guy, and what's more, she's thinking of letting him stay at her place. The hell happened to decorum, huh? I wanna meet this guy. See what he's about."

"Just…drop it…"

"What, you're saying I can't? I can always dump him off in a beast nest, if you'd rather. I mean, who knows what this guy is capable of? As vice commander, it's my job to get rid of him ASAP! But you know, Akane, you might be able to convince me to let him off the hook. You get what I'm saying?"

Yuudai brings his face right up next to hers.

“STOP.”

Then, he goes flying like he just got punched.

Akane’s body is wreathed in a dense shell of magic. It’s on an order of magnitude stronger than anything Yuudai is capable of generating, and she’s not even using her full power.

Cold sweat streams down Yuudai’s face.

His face flushes red as he bellows, like he’s trying to hide how scared he is. “Y-you little… Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“I know exactly who I am, thank you very much.”

“Nah, you don’t know shit! I know, though. I know everything!”

“Everything? What are you even—?”

“You’re a murderer.”

Akane’s expression freezes.

“I know all your secrets, little miss murderer.”

All the blood drains from her face, and her eyes go wide like she’s just witnessed something she can’t believe.

“You’re gonna wanna think loooong and hard about the position you’re in. I’m letting you off the hook right now, but this isn’t the last disciplinary action you’ll be getting.”

“Th-that’s not true… I’m not…”

“Of course it’s true. You’re a killer.”

Yuudai turns and walks off, leaving Akane standing shell-shocked and alone.

The corridor is as white as white can be.

All of it, from the ceiling to the walls to the floor, is a cold, blank white. Akane Nishino, with her black hair and red eyes, walks down its length with an equally cold, blank expression.

Her gait is rhythmic and dispassionate. It’s like she’s left her emotions behind somewhere.

She reaches a door and stops in front of it.

The door is white as well. She puts in her password to unlock it and goes inside.

“Oh hey, she’s awake,” she remarks with a smile. Her cold, blank expression is gone like it was never there.

“Oh, hello Akane. Yes, she woke up around noon,” replies a researcher in a lab coat. The researcher is one of Akira’s employees.

The room has a white bed in it, and there’s a pretty silver-haired girl sitting atop it. The girl—Natsume, the Awakened—has a mole under one of her blue, catlike eyes.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Akane Nishino.”

When Akane introduces herself, Natsume gives her an adorable little tilt of the head.

“As far as we can tell, she can’t understand a word of what we’re saying,” the researcher says.

“She can’t even read and write?”

“It doesn’t appear so, no. I was just in the middle of reading her this picture book. She seems interested, so I’m sure that if we keep this up, she’ll be able to talk eventually.”

The researcher opens the book back up.

It’s a picture book, and a relatively obscure one.

The university library’s catalog has plenty of better-known picture books in it, but all of them were probably checked out already. The base’s birth rate has been increasing year by year.

They’re having trouble supporting the population they already have, but it’s not like they can just force people to stop having children. Without progeny, the human race will wither away and die.

“She’s a cute kid…”

“She really is.”

Due to her looks, anyone can tell at a single glance that Natsume’s an Awakened, and between that and her not understanding Japanese, she’s probably been through more than her share of hardships.

In spite of that, though, the way she’s looking at Akane is downright cherubic. She doesn’t seem to be scared of people at all. She was probably a kind soul before she became an Awakened.

“I wonder what she’s staring at?”

Natsume’s blue eyes are fixed on the room’s desk. There’s a slim liquid crystal clock sitting atop it.

“Do you want to see the clock?”

Akane hands it over, and Natsume’s eyes go wide and light up with delight. It’s just a normal old clock, yet the curiosity she shows in her face as she fiddles with it seems to be genuine.

Her personality is like a child’s. It’s like she’s an innocent little kid who doesn’t know anything about the world.

“Heh, looks like she’s enjoying herself,” Akane says.

She really does. She turns it over again and again, fiddles with its components, and stares at it from close up. She’s the spitting image of a child who’s just been given a new toy to play with.

“It’s incredible how interested she is in everything. She spent ages checking out her bed frame, and her eyes went wide at every little bolt and screw,” the researcher says.

“Looks like we’ve got a curious one on our hands,” Akane replies.

“You’re telling me. When I lent her my mechanical pencil, it took me half an hour to get it back from her.”

“That’s adorable.”

“Oh, it was.”

Then, something starts beeping.

“Ah!”

Natsume is so surprised, she ends up dropping the clock.

Akane pats her head and says softly, “Oh, the clock’s alarm went off. Did that startle you? I’m sorry.”

Natsume watches wistfully as the researcher picks up the clock and puts it back on the desk.

“Oh hey, the time’s wrong,” Akane points out.

“I guess she must have changed it when she was fiddling around with it.”

The researcher goes to readjust the clock.

Upon reaching her hand into her pocket, however, she stops and tilts her head in confusion. “Huh, where did I leave it…?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have this digital watch that I was going to set the time by, but it’s not in my pocket…”

“Did you leave it in your room or something?”

“I always have it on me, so I shouldn’t have. That’s weird…”

“Could you have dropped it somewhere?”

“You might be onto something. The wristband is pretty worn out, so maybe that’s it.”

The researcher lets out a defeated sigh. Her eyes and Natsume’s eyes meet.

The girl’s blue eyes are focused squarely on her and Akane. It’s almost like she’s observing them.

The researcher is pretty sure she’s just imagining things, though.

Not a moment later, Natsume gives her an innocent smile and tilts her head. It’s like she’s saying *Who, me?*

“She really is adorable.”

“Yeah, like a little princess.”

The two of them forget all about the watch and pat Natsume’s head. Natsume takes their head pats with a smile.

However, her gaze is fixed right on the way their mouths are moving.

As she watches, she mimics them and moves her lips and throat in the same way. She takes care not to make a sound or get spotted, but she repeats the small movements over and over.

Then, the door swings open.

“Hey, have any of you seen my camera?”

It’s Akira Nishino.

“What camera, the one you use to keep records?”

“Yeah, that one. I swear I had it this morning…”

Akira makes sure to always carry around a small digital camera so he can document things.

“Well, it’s not in here. Maybe you dropped it somewhere?”

“Dammit, where is that thing?” As he looks around the room in irritation, his gaze lands on the blue eyes that are staring right at him. “Was it you?

Did you take it? The last place I saw it was here, this morning, right before you got here."

"W-wait, Akira, hold up," Akane butts in. "Why would she do something like that?"

Natsume gives Akira an adorable head tilt and smiles at him like a child with an empty head and a heart of gold.

"…Fair enough."

Not even Akira can stay mad when he sees a face like that. He lets out a long exhale to get his head back on straight.

He flips open the room's laptop, puts in his password, and gets to work.

"Brother dear, do you think you're going to be able to cure Natsume's mutation?"

"Who knows?" he replies bluntly. He continues working.

As he does, Natsume's eyes are darting around like bullets. She's looking at the laptop screen and the way Akira's fingers are moving.

"Do you even *care* about helping her?"

"Right now, I have bigger fish to fry. The stampede is right around the corner, and the inspection today found new Brute tracks. If Messiah gets hit by both of those at once, that's it for us."

"What are we going to do?"

"My hope was that we could at least kill the Brute before the stampede starts, but I'm not optimistic. All we can do is fortify our troops and pray."

"Have you considered asking other bases for help?"

"Ha. If I tried, they'd try to shake us down for our generator. Not happening."

"What would you have us do, then? You're not seriously thinking of using that monster head from the incident last week, are you?"

"And why wouldn't I be? The power that thing has hidden away inside it comes from a whole different dimension than the beasts. If we can just *harness* it…"

"…You're actually serious."

"And that's not all. The girl is blessed with tremendous power as well, and her blood work revealed all sorts of fascinating things."

"Fascinating how?"

"Heh-heh-heh…"

Akira lets out an inscrutable laugh and refuses to elaborate any more.

After a little while, he finishes his work and heads out. Akane and the researcher follow soon after.

"See you tomorrow!" they say as they go. Natsume sees them off with a demure smile.

However, those blue eyes of hers are watching everything. She's observing the door's structure, the lock's mechanisms, and the way people's fingers move as they put in their passwords.

Once she's alone, the lights go out.

Her blue eyes move in the darkness, and her gaze darts straight toward the laptop.

The sound of clicking and clacking fills the room for the rest of the night.

I end up getting kicked out of Dr. Yuuka's infirmary.

Apparently, the big fight yesterday meant that there weren't enough beds left. Them's the breaks.

Honestly, this works out pretty all right for me.

The fact of the matter is, there were too many people in the infirmary for me to easily sneak out. I was all pumped up about picking what nests I would get to destroy last night, but in the end, I had such a hard time leaving that I had to call it quits after just knocking over the nest at the elementary school.

My current theory is that checking out places with tons of magical beasts will help me find leads on the black hole, but alas.

So, what to do now? Should I try to dig up more intel here, or should I go smash up another nest or two? I guess I could also try looking for Mr. Bat Guy's head.

There are so many good options to choose from, but there's one big problem.

"This'll be fun, Minoru."

"Yeah, fun…"

I never thought Akane Nishino would be in charge of looking after me, but apparently, we're going to be living together for a while.

She and I were classmates back in the day, and while she obviously had no idea who I was, she does know about a couple of incidents I'm not too proud of.

The problem wasn't her; she had all the makings of a fantastic protagonist. Or maybe she was gonna be one of the protagonist's love interests, I dunno.

Either way, though, the big tragedy was what an amateurish eminence in shadow I was back then. Due to my general inexperience, most of my victories came as last-second comebacks after I got my back pushed against the wall. That's no way for an eminence in shadow to be.

Those moments are like a black stain on my legacy. What I wouldn't give to be able to do them over.

Now that I think about it, though, this situation is my chance to do exactly that. The shadowbroker moves I've got at my disposal could blow my high school self out of the water.

This might just be the opportunity of a lifetime.

Plus, her knight duties keep her away most of the time, so it'll be dead easy to sneak out now.

I guess today's just my lucky day.

"You look so similar…"

"…Huh?"

As I spend my time envisioning all my perfect shadowbroker moves, the girl walking beside me continues peering at my face.

"What, is there someone I look like?"

I literally changed my entire face, so the possibility seems slim.

"It really is uncanny. I don't know what it is, but that expression you make when you're thinking is just like his. What is it you were thinking about?"

"Nothing worth sharing…"

She chuckles. "See, he did that same thing. You don't want to tell anyone, right? You want to keep your secrets all to yourself."

"I dunno what you're talking about, ma'am."

My denial goes in one ear and out the other. "It's fine, I get it. That was just the type of person he was. He had something precious to him that he never talked about. And now, he's gone."

Did this guy she's talking about move away or something?

"But even though he didn't talk much, I like to think I understood him a little. I spent a long time watching him, after all."

What're you, a stalker?

"Oh, and Minoru, you don't have to be so formal."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have to call me 'ma'am.' It's not like you're doing it because you actually respect me, right?"

Damn, busted.

I will say, though, that isn't quite it. It's not that I *don't* respect her, I just don't feel like throwing in a "sir" or a "ma'am" here and there is a meaningful display of respect one way or the other. However, society doesn't see it that way, and as a dutiful background character, I always make sure to obey societal norms.

Personally, though, I show my respect to the people I respect in my own way.

"I respect you just fine," I say, to set the record straight.

She laughs, seemingly amused. "I thought you might say that."

From there, the two of us share some more small talk as we walk through the residential area.

It kind of reminds me of the past.

"We're here. This is me." She stops in front of a door. It leads to a room in one of the university's classroom buildings. "The student dorms were too small to hold everyone, so we expanded them and built more rooms, but even that wasn't enough, so we ended up remodeling the classrooms, as well. I'm a knight, so I ended up with one of the slightly larger ones."

She opens the door and reveals the smallish classroom inside. All the chairs and desks that people once learned at have been removed, but the big whiteboard on the wall has been left as is.

The classroom is split with wooden partitions, and the section we're in right now is the largest combined living room-dining room of the lot. The bedroom off to the side is mine.

"This is where you'll be staying."

My new room is just over one hundred square feet. It's furnished with a bed, a small desk, and nothing else.

"And this room right next to it is mine. Don't you go peeking on me," she says with a playful grin as she continues the tour. There's no door separating our rooms, just another partition.

Over on the other side, her room is basically the same as mine. The sole difference is that she's got a gray locker.

"Those are the only clothes you've got, right?"

"Yup."

I'm still wearing the hoodie from the Tanakas'. That said, I'm a short supply run away from however many clothes I want.

Akane opens her locker and retrieves an outfit. "Here, try this on for size."

Damn, that brings me back. It's a Sakurazaka High School male student uniform.

"Aren't only knights supposed to wear those, though?" I ask.

"You shouldn't take it out of the room, but it should be fine to use as loungewear. You'll need something to wear while you do laundry."

"Well hey, thanks."

I take the uniform.

"Now hurry up, try it on!"

"Wait, now?"

"Come on, time's a-wastin'! I've got a big load I want to do."

Oh, that makes sense. The weather's nice today, so they'll dry pretty quickly.

She gives me a little push, and I head over to my room and slide my arms through the uniform for the first time in ages.

"Huh."

Oddly enough, it fits as snugly as an old glove. It feels even better on me than my slime bodysuit, which shouldn't be possible.

"Huh?"

Then, I spot a stain on one of the cuffs. It almost looks like a bloodstain, and what's more, it's in the exact same spot where I got my own uniform stained in a fight.

I'm sure it's just a coincidence, though. It's been so long, I can barely even remember what that stain looked like.

"How's it going over there? Does it fit?" Akane calls.

"Yup."

“Well, let’s see how you—”

She pops her head through the partition, then goes speechless mid-sentence.

It’s like she just saw a ghost.

I turn around and check, just to be sure. No ghost.

“I-I’m sorry. I just… I’m sorry.”

Dunno what she’s apologizing for.

She wipes away a tear and lets out a strangely sad laugh. “Sorry about that, I just got hit with a lot of memories…”

“Don’t worry about it. Thinking about the past makes me break out into laughter and stuff all the time.”

Every time I reminisce on a time when I got to pull off some sweet shadowbroker move, I always end up grinning like an idiot.

“I’m going to go do the laundry, but I’ll be back soon.”

She turns her face away from me, picks up my clothes, and leaves.

“Now I am alone.”

I appreciate that she’s washing my clothes, but I wouldn’t have minded a bit more of an explanation before she dipped.

I’m left with nothing to do for the time being, so I head over to our living room area and take a seat on its tattered sofa. The university must’ve kept it around for visitors or something.

On the table, I spot a cup, a pen, a notepad, and also…

“Wait…are those drugs?”

There are two different kinds there. The first is a white pill I recognize as some sort of over-the-counter medicine, but the other ones are large blue capsules that I’ve never seen before.

“C’mon, kids. Say no to stimulants.”

If you’re gonna dope, there are tons of drugs that are way better for that. She seems pretty straitlaced, though, so I guess that’s probably not it.

What could they be, then?

I think about it for a little while, then ultimately conclude, “Eh, whatever.” I do a big stretch.

“Hnnngh…”

Then, out of the blue, I sense someone approaching. I quickly straighten my posture.

A moment later, the doorknob rattles. Then, it keeps on rattling. *Rattle, rattle, rattle.*

I wonder if whoever it is has ever heard of locks.

I spend a minute pondering whether or not I should do something about it, but I end up just watching things play out after deciding that I can’t be bothered.

The rattling grows louder and louder until eventually the lock snaps.

“I’m comin’ in.”

It’s a gorilla.

I guess Japan's really gone to the dogs. As I stare at it in shock, though, I realize that it isn't a gorilla at all, just a person who happens to be a dead ringer for one.

He looks kinda familiar, but I might be imagining things.

"So, you're the kid Akane adopted, huh?"

I make sure to tremble in my boots like a good background character should. "Y-you can't just barge in like that!"

"Hey, no need to be so scared. I'm Yuudai Saejima, vice commander of the knight order. I'm one of the good guys."

"Yuudai Saejima…"

Now that *definitely* sounds familiar. Then, just like that, it comes back to me.

He's the gorilla who was in my class.

With looks like his, I knew he'd make for a great supporting character, so I made sure to remember who he was.

I'm so glad he grew up into such a splendid adult gorilla!

"W-were you looking for Akane?'

"Nah, you're the one I'm after. See, there's something about you that just doesn't sit right with me."

Yuudai plops himself down right across from me.

"What did I do?"

"We've got a rat in our base. A spy, if that wasn't clear enough. Someone from an enemy base is messing with Messiah."

"I-I'm not a spy!"

"You say that, sure, but the knight order can't just go around believing everything it hears."

"N-no, really, I'm not!"

"Shaddup, you!"

Yuudai's voice suddenly turns rough and threatening. He grabs me by the collar—

"I could throw you into a beast nest right now, you know."

—and shouts at me with his gorilla face.

As a humble background character, all I can do in the face of such a terrible threat is quiver. "Ahhh!"

Then, the cavalry arrives.

"The hell do you think you're doing?!"

Akane storms over, shaking with rage.

"What do you mean? I'm interrogating him, duh," Yuudai replies, not letting go of my collar.

"You're *what*? On whose authority?"

"On my authority as vice commander, that's who. You know about the rat just as well as I do. The way I see it, he's just about the only suspicious person who's shown up lately."

"He hasn't even been here for two full days yet. We have confirmation that the rat's been here longer than that."

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I still gotta interrogate him.”

Yuudai and Akane stare daggers at each other, and eventually—

“…What are you hoping to get out of this?” Akane asks.

“You know exactly what I want.”

—Yuudai lets go of me and turns around.

“Oh, right, and the commander’s holding an emergency meeting tonight. See you there, hon.”

He gives her a light thump on the shoulder and leaves.

“I bet that was pretty scary. Don’t you worry about him, all right?”

Akane smiles like nothing just happened and starts filling me in on what life is like in Messiah.

Sounds like she’s gonna be working tonight, so I’ll be able to sneak out to my heart’s content.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
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as it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
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behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
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I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Something Smells Fishy...
But an Eminence in Shadow
Always Cracks the Case!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Something Smells Fishy... But an Eminence in Shadow Always Cracks the Case!

Akane is on the night shift today.

After the sun sets and she finishes eating dinner with Minoru, she heads to the knight order station. It's dangerous out, so she makes sure Minoru knows not to leave his room.

Night is the most dangerous time of day, and the night shift has their work cut out for them. Just yesterday, a knight died defending the wall from a beast attack. With the stampede right around the corner, the beasts are already starting to get more violent.

"Excuse me."

She opens the door to the office and finds the knight representatives gathered inside. She's technically a squad leader as well.

"Someone's late. Enjoy yourself this afternoon?" says Yuudai, who's already sitting down.

"I'm sorry for my tardiness."

She wasn't actually late, but it is true that she's the last one to arrive.

"No, no, there's no need to apologize. You're right on time, young Akane."

The speaker is the knight order commander—a man named Haitani.

He started out as a corporate big shot before quitting and starting a business of his own. Perhaps that's why he's so good at managing others.

He also awakened to his knight powers early on, and has gotten Messiah out of more than a few pinches.

"I see everyone's here, so let's get things started."

Akane sits down, and the meeting begins.

They start by giving simple status updates, with each member sharing what new information they have on the Brute, the stampede, and the enemy agent inside Messiah.

They also need to deal with the situation involving Akane leaving the base at night without permission, but they decide to table that discussion until after the stampede.

Once everything's been covered, Commander Haitani gets down to business. "Now, let's move on to today's main topic."

A lot of people had assumed that the Akane situation was going to be the main order of business, and the sound of rustling in seats briefly fills the room.

“These pictures are from the squad that was investigating the Brute today.”

Commander Haitani passes out a stack of printed photographs. When people see them, they’re struck speechless.

“What the…?”

The photo is of mangled beast corpses—hundreds of them.

There’s also a destroyed building just barely visible in the edge of the shot. It looks sort of familiar.

“Is that…Nishino Elementary?” someone stammers. They don’t sound at all confident of that. Nishino Elementary School is the second closest large-scale beast nest to Messiah after Sakurazaka High School, and the last time anyone checked, the building was still standing.

“There’s more.”

The next photo Haitani passes around is clearly of the elementary school building. It’s been reduced to rubble.

“D-did the Brute do this?” Yuudai asks, his voice trembling ever so slightly.

“We examined the corpses, and the cuts were unbelievably clean. Most of them died from a single slash to the vitals. Not even an apex beast has that kind of finesse.”

“Was it a group from another base, then?”

Commander Haitani shakes his head. “Nobody in the area has the man power to pull off something like this. And there’s something else that caught our eye, too.”

“What’s that?”

“All the cuts looked exactly the same.”

“*All* of them?”

“All of them. In all likelihood, all of the beasts were killed by the same person.”

Yuudai’s face goes red. “C-come on, Commander, that’s crazy talk! There’s hundreds of the damn things! I could see ten or twenty, maybe, but there’s no way a single person could’ve killed that many on their own!” he roars.

“What if there was, though? What if our world had a knight that was capable of something like that?”

“Wh-what proof do you even—?”

“Take another look at the cross section on the schoolhouse.”

“Wh…?! That’s…a slash mark? You’re saying someone *cut the building down*?!”

Sure enough, the photo shows that the building’s been sliced in twain.

“Not only that, the cut was clean,” Commander Haitani replies. “Like a hot knife through butter. Japan used to have a knight capable of things like this, you know. I believe you’re all familiar with her.”

“The Original Knight…,” someone whispers.

“Is she really back…?”

“I thought she went missing…”

“Is she here to destroy Messiah…?”

The knights go pale, and Akane is the palest of them all.

“We don’t know for certain that it’s her yet. It could easily be some other knight just as strong,” Commander Haitani offers, to calm down the group. “Don’t let baseless fear get the better of you, but don’t let your guard down, either. All we know for sure is that there’s someone nearby who was strong enough to do this. I’m sure you can imagine what would happen if they attacked Messiah.”

Everyone nods. Then, all hell breaks loose.

“We’re under attack! The beasts are here!”

The shrill noise of a siren splits the air.

The tops of the walls surrounding the base are a battlefield.

Legions of beasts are clinging to the sides and trying to climb over. The knights are doing their best to knock them off with swords and spears, but it’s all too plain to see that there aren’t enough of them to go up against the beasts’ sheer numbers.

“Go wake up every off-duty knight you can find! We’re not letting these things get inside!” the commander bellows.

Akane races to the top of the wall and cuts a beast in half.

“Akane!”

“A-Akane’s here!”

Out of all the knights there, her efforts stand out the most.

She’s faster than all the others. Stronger. She mows down beasts one after another.

But it’s not enough.

“AHHHHHHH!”

“Agh! G-get back! Stay away from me, you monsters!”

There are too many of them.

The beast pack reaches the top of the walls and surges at the knights.

Akane grimaces. “There’s so damn many of them…”

At this rate, more and more knights are just going to get butchered.

“Commander, could the stampede have started already?!” she shouts over to Haitani, who’s fighting by her side.

“No, the stampede is going to be far worse than this,” he replies. “This is probably just a prelude.”

“This many beasts, and it’s not even the majority of them…?”

“This stampede is going to be a harsh one.”

If that’s the case, they need to keep every knight they can alive here.

Akane stands at the vanguard to draw the beasts’ attention, then leaps off the wall.

“Akane?!”

“Young Akane, what do you think you’re doing?!”

The moment she lands, she swings her sword in a wide arc. Every beast around her drops dead.

“I’ll lure them somewhere else!” she shouts back.

“Don’t throw your life away! Get back here at once!”

Even if Akane wanted to obey Commander Haitani’s order, though, she couldn’t. There’s nowhere for her to run.

The beasts have already surrounded her, and they lash out with their jagged claws and fangs.

Akane dodges the attacks by a hairbreadth, then slices down her attackers.

She isn’t afraid.

Dying would be a mercy for her.

Better that than becoming someone she doesn’t recognize in a place she doesn’t know and doing the unthinkable.

Tragedies from the past flash back through her mind.

As she stands surrounded by beasts, she smiles, then takes off at a dash across the corpses of the ones she’s felled. Blood gushes up from them and drenches her body red.

Then…

“Akane, behind you!”

“Young Akane, watch out!”

A bladed claw slices down on her from overhead.

She’s faced with two choices.

Live, or die.

It’s never an easy decision for her.

She smiles sadly and closes her eyes.

Then, out of nowhere, she senses a presence that feels almost nostalgic.

She hears the sound of flesh tearing.

Warm liquid rains down on her.

“Huh…?”

It’s beast blood.

When she opens her eyes, the first thing she sees is the impaled beast.

The next is an ebony sword.

It’s piercing the beast clean through.

“Wh-who are you…?”

A pair of red eyes gazes down on Akane.

The ebony sword’s wielder is wearing a longcoat that looks like it’s made of pure darkness. Their face is concealed beneath a mask and a hood.

“The Black Knight…,” someone murmurs.

All eyes are on the Black Knight. It’s like time itself is standing still.

He effortlessly casts aside the skewered beast, then turns his back on them all.

When he speaks, his voice rumbles like it’s coming up from the depths of the abyss. “The wind…is weeping.”

Nobody knows what, exactly, that means.

However, his quote resonates in their hearts all the same.

They can feel the weight of the countless lives and deaths that rest within those words.

Suddenly, Akane feels a sharp breeze.

The ebony wind rushes over the Black Knight, obscuring him from sight.

Then, it whirls toward the beast horde, and flowers of blood blossom in its wake.

In the end, all that remain are beast corpses.

“What…just happened?”

“H-how is that possible?”

The people on the walls stand in shocked disbelief.

When the ebony wind blew past, it sliced each and every beast in two.

That was no passing breeze—it was magic, refined until it was as natural and flowing as actual wind. They can’t even begin to imagine how much training must have gone into perfecting that technique. It must have taken an eternity.

The Black Knight is gone.

The next thing Akane realizes, she’s trembling.

“Are you okay?” Commander Haitani comes down from the wall and hurries over to her. “That was tremendous… He might well be the person who destroyed the nest at Nishino Elementary.”

“Commander… He was an Awakened.”

The man’s eyes were the same red as Akane’s.

Haitani nods and glances over at the dead beasts. “All of them, dead from a single clean slash. I certainly couldn’t have pulled that off.”

“He saved us. But…why leave without saying anything?”

“He must have had some sort of objective. For now, all we can do is pray he’s not our enemy.” The commander looks up at the night sky. “I wonder… what did he mean when he said the wind was weeping?”

“He must know something,” Akane replies. “Something we don’t. Something important.”

“Black Knight… Just who are you?”

The question fades into the night sky, unanswered.

It’s still the dead of night, but the base is completely astir.

Even with the beast attack repelled, there are still tons of people milling about. However, there's one knight who manages to slip away from the hustle and bustle.

The man—who has a decided air of roughness about him—is none other than Vice Commander Yuudai Saejima.

"Tch. This is some bullshit."

He spits the words out as he heads around the darkened school building. Out back, removed from the main walkways, there's a quiet, unlit alley.

"The Black Knight, huh? I don't like this guy. I don't like him one bit. I dunno what base he's from, but he can't just stroll in here and do whatever the hell he wants."

He stomps through the darkness, hurling invectives as he goes.

Judging by his stride, he has a clear destination in mind.

"Is he with the Alliance? Nah, they'd have told me he was coming. But if that's not it, then what…?"

Clop. Clop.

He hears footsteps behind him.

"Oh hey, you're early. Your intel was—"

Right as he turns around, though, he hears another noise.

Ptchoo.

"Huh?"

Something pierces him in the chest.

He clamps his hands over the wound to try to stem the bleeding.

"B-but why…?"

Ptchoo. Ptchoo.

Each time the noise rings out, more blood sprays through the air.

Yuudai collapses to the ground, his eyes wide in shock.

He coughs up blood a few times, then goes still.

The only noise left in the alley is the sound of footsteps.

Clop. Clop.

Man, that was a blast.

I spend a moment basking in my exultation as I dash across the night-clad university campus.

I snuck out of my room earlier tonight because I wanted to check the campus out, but midway through my inspection, I ran straight into an unexpected magical beast attack event.

"I finally did it… I got to use my 'the wind is weeping' line."

That's one more quote I can cross off the old bucket list.

And better yet, I delivered it with all the aloofness and gravitas a proper eminence in shadow should have.

Now, at long last, I can say I was able to play the part of the perfect shadowbroker I was too weak to pull off back in my old life.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

Just thinking about how perfectly that went down makes me break out into a grin, but I know my roommate will be back any minute now.

I left the window open when I snuck out, so I sneak back in the same way, quickly change my clothes, and crawl into bed.

Not a moment later, the doorknob rattles to announce Akane's return.

"…I'm back," she says quietly.

If I'd taken any detours on my way back, I wouldn't have made it in time. I continue pretending to sleep as I breathe a sigh of relief at how close I cut it.

The room is quiet, save for the sound of clothes rustling. She's probably getting changed.

I smell the faint odor of blood.

After a short while, she calls over to me. "Minoru, are you awake?"

My first instinct is to continue feigning sleep, but I wanna get her impressions on how I did tonight. "Yeah, I'm up."

"Can I come in?"

Before giving me a chance to reply, she barges straight into my section and sits down on my bed.

She *seriously* reeks of blood.

I guess it makes sense, given all that magical beast blood she got sprayed with.

"Did something happen…?" I ask.

She just keeps sitting there, not saying a word.

Despite my attempt to start a conversation, she just hangs her head silently.

"…Have you ever wanted to die?" she eventually asks, her voice faltering.

"Nope."

If anything, I wanna live forever.

In all my life to date, not once have I ever wanted to die.

I occasionally run into people who say that longevity isn't for them, but I doubt I'll ever understand where they're coming from. I wanna keep being me for as long as possible, down to the second.

"I… I have."

"You have, huh?"

That's a shame.

"But when I try to remember…I just can't. It's like there's this gaping hole in my memory."

I can't say I totally follow.

She lapses back into silence.

Then, I notice that her shoulders are trembling.

"Minoru, have you…ever killed someone?"

Yeah, loads of ’em.

“You mean, like, murder?” I reply. “That’s so scary, I don’t even want to think about it.”

“I don’t blame you…”

“What about you, Nishino?”

“What would you do…if I told you I might have?”

“Uh…”

“I’m joking.”

She smiles.

Then, she turns her gaze outside the window and lets out a quiet murmur. “I’ve been waiting…for so long…”

“Waiting for what?”

She doesn’t reply. At this point, I don’t think I’m the one she’s really talking to anymore.

She stares up at the night sky, like she’s trying to converse with someone who’s gone far away.

“Please… Come save me…”

She mumbles someone’s name.

Then, she sits frozen there like a statue until morning.

In fact, she does it all the way up until the sun rises and a commotion becomes audible off in the distance. I have to spend the entire time pretending to sleep.

Actually, that reminds me of something.

During my old life, I meddled in this one situation, and Akira Nishino punched me right in the face. I thought I recognized his obnoxious mug from somewhere.

In fact, he was the whole reason I swore to break every window on the campus.

I’ll never forgive him.

Although he did take Beta off my hands, so I guess I *can* forgive him.

Then, my thoughts get interrupted.

“Akane, come quick!”

It’s barely even morning yet, but someone from the knight order is banging on our door.

“I-it’s the vice commander! Vice Commander Saejima’s been murdered!”

Oh no. Our precious gorilla.

Dr. Yuuka sits down in front of Akane. “This is some pretty serious business.”

“I…I didn’t do it.”

Sounds like I missed some stuff.

Akane left me on house-sitting duty and headed for the scene of the crime as soon as she heard the news, and when she came back, Dr. Yuuka was with her.

“I want to believe you, but there are eyewitnesses who say they saw you and the vice commander arguing last night.”

Akane’s voice quivers. “That was nothing. It was just… It was about Minoru.”

“Well, the estimated time of death is three AM. Do you have an alibi?”

“…No.”

By the time I got back, it was already past three as well.

“There’s also verbal testimony placing you near the scene of the crime.”

“Is… Is that so…?”

Akane hangs her head. Her shoulders tremble.

I did smell blood on her last night, and I guess she could’ve killed him on the spur of the moment or something.

Stuff like that happens all the time, but she doesn’t really seem the type.

“Commander Haitani is going to be leading a full investigation. Until he gets his verdict, you have orders not to leave this room.”

Akane clenches her fists and shakes her head. “I didn’t do it… I swear, I didn’t…”

She’s an old acquaintance, so I decide to throw in a good word for her. “Hold on a minute. I don’t think Akane did it, either.”

“Minoru…”

“I mean, look at that picture.”

I point at one of the crime scene photos laid out on the table. It’s an image of Yuudai’s slashed-up corpse.

“What about it?” Dr. Yuuka asks.

“It’s weird, don’t you think? The cuts are too sloppy.”

The corpse is in pieces, and none of the cross sections of the cuts are clean.

Dr. Yuuka’s gaze grows steely. “What do you mean, sloppy?”

“If Akane did this, I’m pretty sure the cuts would’ve been cleaner.”

When a strong enough dark knight slashes a person, the cuts are always nice and clean. However, the cuts on Yuudai’s body couldn’t possibly be any rougher.

In his case, it looks like someone took a dull sword and just went to town on him.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right…”

Of course, there is a chance that she cut him up like that on *purpose* to make it hurt more, but I think I’m gonna keep that possibility to myself.

“Minoru… Th-thank you. Thank you so much,” Akane blubbers.

Yeah, no problem.

“Please, you have to believe me… I didn’t—I didn’t do it…!”

Her shoulders tremble even harder.

“Hey, Akane, calm down.”

“I didn’t do it! I—I would never, never again, I, I—”

“Akane…”

Something is clearly wrong with her. Dr. Yuuka hugs her tight. “It’s okay, just calm down. Calm down, take your pills…”

As she tries to pacify her, she slips her a little white pill.

Akane trembles a little more, but her breathing eventually becomes calm and steady. She’s out like a light.

Dr. Yuuka casts her gaze down. “…That must have startled you.”

“A little, yeah… What was that pill?”

“It’s to calm her down. My specialty is in psychosomatic medicine. Akane has some psychological trauma she’s dealing with, and I’m helping her treat it.”

“What kind of trauma?”

“She was involved in some sort of incident, and she’s bottled up all her memories of what happened. Whenever something causes that bottle to start becoming uncorked, she ends up freaking out like she did just now.”

“Oh, huh…,” I reply, doing my best to look contemplative.

“I’ve only been at this base for half a year, but her condition’s improved dramatically since then. Akane saved me once, so I’m just glad to have the opportunity to repay her.”

“Wow, I never knew.”

Dr. Yuuka drapes a blanket over Akane’s shoulders. “Now, about what you brought up earlier… I’ll go tell the commander what you said about the cuts. This could be the work of an assassin from an enemy base. And with how the Black Knight showed up last night, he could easily have been involved as well…”

The Black Knight is innocent. That much I can say for sure.

Dr. Yuuka goes on. “Anyway, just leave the rest to me. The best thing you can do is to stay by Akane’s side.”

“No, no, I want to investigate, too.”

“I’m not sure how the knight order will feel about that.”

“I won’t get in their way, I promise. Akane helped me out, too, so I want to do what I can to help repay her as well.”

“Minoru…”

Dr. Yuuka stares at my face for a bit, then lets out a defeated sigh.

“Okay, fine. If you find anything, come straight to me with it. Don’t try to be a hero. Don’t forget that Natsume needs you, too.”

And with that, I’m finally allowed to roam about as I please.

“What to do, what to do.”

I start off by grabbing my lunch rations, then meander around the campus.

Akane claims she's not the culprit, but unfortunately, the circumstantial evidence is weighted pretty heavily against her.

"A mysterious crime, false charges against the protagonist… Feels like the main plotline is underway."

If that's the case, I've got a moral obligation to get involved.

"Now, the crime happened over there, huh…?"

I watch from a distance as the knight order gathers in an alleyway right off the main school building.

They've got some great "investigation in progress" vibes going on.

If I tried to butt my way in there as an outsider, they'd toss me out for sure. Better not to even try.

"Bummer that I don't have any other leads to work off… Wait, huh?"

When I look around, I spot a fat guy in glasses sitting on a bench and tapping away at a laptop.

"Oh hey, they've got computers here."

I totally forgot they had electricity.

I assume it isn't connected to the internet, but…huuuh?

When I sneak up behind him and peek over his shoulder, I discover that he's posting on some sort of forum.

"Hey, you get internet on that thing?"

"Gah?!"

When I ask him a question, Fatty McSpecs hurriedly whirls around.

"Wh-what's your problem, man?!" he yelps.

"Oh, just curious. Does that thing get internet?"

"Huh? What, this? It's hooked up to the university intranet. How do you not know that?"

"Ohhh, so it only connects to other people on campus. Still, I bet that's good enough for gathering intel."

"Look, just go find someone else to bug. I'm busy."

With that, Fatty McSpecs goes back to posting on his forum.

[THREAD] The real reason Akane killed Saejima

[BODY] so who's got them Akane lewds?

Oh yeah. Real busy.

"Lemme borrow your laptop for a bit."

"Get lost, dude, I'm not lending you shit."

"Thanks, I'll give it right back."

"Huh…?!"

I knock Fatty McSpecs out with a blisteringly fast knife hand strike and snatch away his laptop.

I make sure to lay him on his side so it looks like he's napping.

"Now, what have we here…?"

A quick search tells me that the forum is full of threads about last night's murder.

It isn't just Akane's thing, either. People are pretty abuzz about the Black Knight, too.

221: Anonymous Victim
Akane didn’t do it, but the Black Knight is sus. This is totally an Alliance plot.
222: Anonymous Victim
according to my knight friend, the Black Knight is strong af
223: Anonymous Victim
that guy’s no joke. he killed 10 beasts in a single second
224: Anonymous Victim
bro what’re you smoking
225: Anonymous Victim
nah man I’m serious
226: Anonymous Victim
if that was true he could just take out a big nest on his own lmao
227: Anonymous Victim
no for real, it’s true. source: im a knight, I was there
228: Anonymous Victim
looooool we got one. “look at me, I’m totally a real knight”
229: Anonymous Victim
we’ve got us a keyboard knight, folks. this shit’s anonymous, maybe we’re all knights lmao
230: Anonymous Victim
haven’t seen a keyboard knight in a while, this should be good
231: Anonymous Victim
there’s literally zero proof that he killed 10 beasts in 1 second. ur bait sucks
232: Anonymous Victim
yeah this black knight dude is probably just some rando and ppl are exaggerating shit bc they’re bored
233: Anonymous Victim
my buddy is a knight and he says the black knight is a shitter
234: Anonymous Victim
no duh
235: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
Don’t lying. The Black Knight is strongerest. He is coolest in world can kill 1000 beasts easy.

“Huh?”

As I’m scrolling through the thread, I suddenly spot a weirdo.

“SilverHairedElfBabe? That’s the dumbest handle I’ve ever seen.”

Beta’s face flashes through my mind for a moment, but thinking about it logically, there’s no way it’s her.

If it was, it would mean she’s mastered Japanese in just three days.

“I mean, I’m glad this chick’s cheering for the Black Knight, but with a handle like that, she’s gonna do more harm than good.”

I’d better give her a friendly heads-up.

Using a tacky handle is a shame that never washes off. Trust me, I would know.

“I’d better make my handle something extra cool so she has a good point of reference to use. ‘Obsidian Wings’… No, wait, ‘Fallen Angel of Rebellion’… But that feels kinda plain, so let’s add a little flair, too.”
237: ⛧ FallenAngelofRebellion ⛧
xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx is a pretty cringe name, you might wanna change it
238: Anonymous Victim
another weirdo showed up lmao
239: Anonymous Victim
“Fallen Angel” LMAOOO “of Rebellion” LMAOOO “ ⛧ ” LMAO “ ⛧ ” LMAOOO “ ⛧ ” LMAO
240: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
I not cringe. FallenAngelofRebellion is cringe.
241: Anonymous Victim
SilverHairedElfBabe vs FallenAngelofRebellion! Round 1, fight!
242: Anonymous Victim
bruh you’re both cringe
243: ⛧ FallenAngelofRebellion ⛧
I am a knight of darkness, a fallen angel who lurks in the shadows and seeks rebellion. How can I be cringe when I have ultimate power on my side?
244: Anonymous Victim
knight of darkness lmaooooo fallen angel lmaooo who lurks in the shadows lmaooo seeks rebellion has blessed us with his presence LMFAOOOOO
245: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
FallenAngelofRebellion is cringe shitter. Black Knight is strongerest. Will instant kill you all.
246: Anonymous Victim
*strongest <- FIFY
247: Anonymous Victim
ngl it’s pretty cute how bad ElfBabe is at Japanese
248: Anonymous Victim
ElfBabe is such a rabid black knight fangirl lol
249: Anonymous Victim
the black knight’s with me rn, he’s licking my asshole
250: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
Don’t lying. Mocking me fine. Don’t dare Black Knight mocking.
251: Anonymous Victim
Translation: Making fun of me is fine, but don’t you dare mock the Black Knight!
252: Anonymous Victim
but it’s true tho. the black knight actually is a shitter, he really did eat my shit
253: Anonymous Victim
black knight = omegashitter

254: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
I kill you.
255: Anonymous Victim
yikes, here come the death threats. You guys trolled her too hard, lol
256: ⛧ FallenAngelofRebellion ⛧
rip
257: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
Black Knight strongerest. Coolest. I love him. I kill any who mocks him.
258: Anonymous Victim
Ahh! I'm gonna die! The black knight is a shitter!
259: Anonymous Victim
I just beat the shit out of the black knight. He begged for mercy naked on his hands and knees tho so I let him live
260: xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx
Shut up. I kill you. Marking my words FallenAngelofRebellion. I show you hell.
261: ⛧ FallenAngelofRebellion ⛧
um? I didn't make fun of him tho
262: Anonymous Victim
Okay, that's way too many death threats. Reported.
263: Anonymous Victim
stampede's coming up and people are getting murdered and this is how you guys are spending your time?
264: ⛧ FallenAngelofRebellion ⛧
wait, I'm the victim here
265: Anonymous Victim
yeah but your handle is cringe sooooo

And with that, xXxSilverHairedElfBabexXx gets banned.

A tiny bit of trolling, and she goes straight to death threats? You don't see much of that these days.

"Seriously, though, I should probably start gathering information at some point. I wonder if anyone here saw anything…"

After that, I finagle myself into the good graces of the fine forum users and get my hands on some valuable intel.

The next day rolls around.

"So, this is the you-know-where…"

I'm at a small research lab in a tucked-away corner of the university.

The sun's already set, and though I can see lights off in the distance, the area I'm in is surrounded by a dense, dark thicket.

According to that intranet forum, this is where they brought the gorilla's corpse.

If I’m lucky, there’ll be magical after-traces on the body, but preserving those is actually pretty difficult. Unless you use special chemicals, they fade away pretty quickly.

Given what world I’m in, I probably shouldn’t expect much out of their preservation techniques.

I mean, they’re still using conventional materials for their swords here. I bet these guys have never even *heard* of mithril.

The metal they’re using does have pretty decent magic conductivity, I’ll give them that, but it doesn’t hold a candle to mithril. It’s no wonder they’re having so much trouble against such weak magical beasts.

“Eh, I’m sure I’ll find *some* sort of clue here.”

There’s a ton of questions surrounding the gorilla’s death, and I intend to solve them.

Step one: Sneak inside, fast and quiet.

There’s a knight standing guard outside the lab’s entrance, but by concealing my presence and dashing past him at full speed, I’m able to sneak past him like it’s nothing.

Once I’m inside, I spot a staircase leading underground. I follow it down to a locked metal door.

“Locked, huh…?”

I don’t have time to screw around, so I use my slime sword to smash the lock.

It’s unfortunate that this means they’ll find out that someone broke in, but as long as they don’t figure out *who*, I’m still golden.

“Oh, wait, I wonder if I could’ve transformed the slime sword into the shape of the key.”

You know, like how Beta made those gloves. Oh well, hindsight is 20/20.

I shrug and head inside.

“Looks like I found the morgue…”

It’s cold and dark.

There are a bunch of dead bodies lying around with sheets covering them, and the air is ripe with the smell of decaying flesh.

I endure the stench and use magic to strengthen my sense of smell. The gorilla’s smell is lodged in my memory.

As it turns out, his body is the one right next to me.

I rip off the sheet and reveal the mangled corpse beneath.

“Hmm…”

Sure enough, most of the magical after-traces are gone, and what little magic still lingers on the body is all mixed up and blended together. It’s not gonna be helpful.

I turn my attention to the cuts, which are just as grisly as they were in the photos.

These aren’t sword wounds. Looks like someone probably took an ax to him.

No, not even an ax would be that messy. This is the work of a saw or something.

They must've sliced him apart after he was already dead.

"The question is, to what end?"

Normally, you slice someone up so you can hide the evidence. After you do your slicing, you can bury, burn, or dissolve the parts more easily.

In our gorilla friend's case, though, he was simply found like this.

Did they just hate him that bad? No, no.

"Oh, I see. It was to hide *this*."

When I try sticking his arm back on, I find there's a piece missing, and we're not talking about excess flesh that got lost in the slicing process. It was removed deliberately.

"Here, too…"

There are a couple other spots that are missing little chunks of flesh as well.

With that, I have the conclusive proof I need.

"Aha. These…are bullet wounds."

After how much I researched guns in my last life to try figuring out a way to beat them, I'd recognize their handiwork anywhere.

People might assume that guns don't work against knights, but that's not quite true.

When they aren't clad in their magic, knights are no sturdier than anyone else.

"In other words, the killer was someone the gorilla didn't expect to get attacked by, maybe someone he knew. And it wasn't a knight, or they wouldn't have needed a gun. Someone who isn't a knight wanted to make it look like a knight did the deed… Heh-heh-heh. Step aside, protagonist. There's a new detective in town."

With this, the odds that Akane is the killer will plummet.

"…Looks like I got what I came for."

I head back to my room, but my plans to report my findings are dashed when the person I was going to report to isn't there.

"Where's Akane?"

The bed she should've been sleeping in is empty, and Dr. Yuuka is sitting over on the couch.

"She had to go in for a checkup. She won't be back until tomorrow."

"Oh, okay."

Given how emotionally unstable she was, I guess that checks out.

"Also, Minoru, do you have any idea what time it is? The stampede's right around the corner, so you should really start coming back sooner. It's not safe out there."

“Sorry about that. I did find an important clue, though.”

“What do you mean…?”

I tell her the shocking news I learned today that all but disproves the theory that Akane is the killer.

“Bullet wounds?! If that’s true, it will clear Akane of all suspicion. How did you find that out, though?”

“I, uh…I guess you could say I know a good information broker?”

“A what now?” Dr. Yuuka eyes me suspiciously, then sighs. “Well, if you say so. I’ll go tell the knight order about the bullet holes. With any luck, we should be able to get them to take another look at the body.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“Make sure you don’t tell anyone else what you just told me. Otherwise, the killer might come after you.”

“W-will do.” I give her a picture-perfect “scared background character” nod.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Dr. Yuuka replies before hurrying out of the room.

That should be enough to help solve the Gorilla Murder Case and free Akane. Good stuff all around.

Wait—hold up.

Did I just miss the perfect opportunity to reveal the truth as the Black Knight?

“Damn, I coulda said something cool like… ‘There is but one real truth.’”

In any case, I crawl into bed and wait for night to come and everyone else to fall asleep.

Night comes.

“Hmm?”

Right as the perfect time to go for a nighttime stroll rolls around, I sense someone loitering outside my room.

A burglar, perhaps?

Damn, I guess things in Japan really have gotten bad.

I muse on the situation and decide to wait and see how this plays out. Not a moment later, bullets tear through the window.

Shards of shattered glass come crashing down with an earsplitting noise.

“Wait, for real?”

Who’da thunk a forgettable background character like me would ever end up getting shot at?

I feel the bullets slam into my skin.

So, this is what nobodies feel like when they get gunned down…

Suddenly, I realize that this might be the last chance I ever get to use a certain Hidden Technique of mine!

When the bullets crash into me, I manipulate my body and pour everything into that one moment.

Get ready to see how a nobody dies, folks.

Behold the power of Hidden Normie Technique: Swiss-Cheese Dance, Bloody Marionette!

My body dances in tune with the bullets striking it. I look like I'm a puppet or something.

To complete the image, I secretly tear open blood pouches and make a beautiful shower of blood rain down around me.

I become the platonic ideal of a background character dying. It's like that one scene in *The Matrix*, but if all the bullets hit.

"ARRRRRRGH! GLURK…GLURK!"

I end my performance by letting out a bloodcurdling scream, spraying blood from my mouth like a fountain, and tumbling unceremoniously off my bed.

Perfection.

I had all but given up on being able to use the Hidden Technique I designed for when I got shot, but now its time has finally arrived!

As I internally pump my fist, I stop my heartbeat.

A million thanks to these burglars for giving me this golden opportunity.

"…Did we get him?"

Once I've played dead for a little while, a pair of men enter the room.

"Oh yeah, for sure. He's as good as Swiss cheese."

The glass shards crunch under their feet.

"Tough break, kid. If you hadn't figured out stuff you weren't supposed to, you wouldn't have had to die."

Huh?

I wonder what he means by that.

"Knights'll be here any minute. We need to hurry up and tear the room apart."

"Yeah, and mess up the body so they can't tell how… Huh?"

Ah, shit.

"Hey, check it out. There's no wounds on the corpse."

The guy checking my body noticed the thing I was hoping he wouldn't notice.

"What're you talking about? There's blood everywhere, dude."

"Sure, but I'm tellin' you, there's no wounds."

"What?"

The second guy comes over and inspects my body, too. At that point, I don't have a choice. I snap my eyes open. "Man, why'd you have to go and spoil my perfectly orchestrated scene?"

"What the—?!"

"How's he still alive?!"

I grab them both by their throats.

"L-let go of me!"

“Sh-shoot him! Shoot him dead!”

They press their guns against my forehead and fire from point-blank.

One *ptchoo* rings out, then another.

They keep coming until their magazines are empty.

Once the men run out of bullets, the *ptchoo*s are replaced by a hollow *click, click, click*.

“H-how?! How is this guy not hurt?!”

“No way—h-he’s a knight?! That wasn’t what we were told!”

“Knight or not, shooting him from that close should’ve at least done some—”

I stand up, still squeezing their necks.

“Aghhh!”

“Looks like you aren’t just any old burglars, huh?”

“Wh-who the hell are you?! Lemme go already!”

One of them punches my face. *Wham. Wham.*

“Someone put you up to this. So it’s, like, an ‘evil mastermind’–type scenario.”

“What are you even—? Ow, ow, ow!”

“Y-you little—OWWWW!”

I lift them by their throats.

“Well, works for me. Now, you can either die slowly and in pain, or you can tell me everything and die easy. Make your choice.”

I put some strength into my grip, and their bones begin creaking loudly.

“Ahhh! L-let me go! I don’t know shit!”

“I—I didn’t know you were a knight! I’m sorry! Please, let me go… I don’t want to die…”

“It’s like you guys said. If you hadn’t figured out stuff you weren’t supposed to, you wouldn’t have had to die. That’s just how it goes sometimes.”

I can hear knights shouting outside.

They’re still pretty far away, but they’re getting closer.

“…Sounds like you’re running out of time, gentlemen.”

“P-please…”

“I-I’m beggin’ you…”

“Hmm, what to do—?”

Then, the voices outside start heading in a different direction than I expected them to.

“It’s the stampede! The stampede is starting!”

A shrill alarm bell starts ringing.

I can sense the clamor spreading as people start waking up.

“Sorry, I just got a better offer. Toodles.”

I snap their necks and melt into the night’s darkness.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
as it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Behold, a Full-Fledged Eminence in Shadow!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Epilogue

Epilogue

Behold, a Full-Fledged Eminence in Shadow!

Akira Nishino runs down the pure-white corridor.

As the alarm bell heralding the stampede rings, he advances deeper and deeper into the research building. It's almost as though he's deliberately heading away from the battlefield.

Both his arms are taken up with carrying a white box.

"*Pant*, *pant*... Shit!"

He stops in front of a white door and curses as he tries to steady his ragged breathing.

"That damn Alliance rat... Now they've gone and done it. I never expected them to make off with Akane...," he mutters, to vent his frustration as he unseals the door's lock.

Inside, there's a pure-white sickroom.

A silver-haired girl is sitting on its bed.

"You're awake? I could have sworn I gave you a sedative..."

The silver-haired girl—Natsume—gives him an adorable tilt of the head.

"The dosage must've been too low. Well, whatever. It's not like you can understand me anyway."

Natsume gives him another head tilt, then looks down and stares quizzically at the white box Akira Nishino is carrying.

"...Curious about the box? This box is going to transform you. You're going to become a stronger knight than even the Original Knight ever was."

When he opens the box, Natsume's eyes widen in surprise.

Inside, there's a cryogenically preserved head.

Sinister black magic weaves coils around its darkened skin and fiery-red hair.

"Surprised? We recovered this from a site we discovered with abnormal magic readings. Eating from this was what let the Brute become the most powerful apex beast we've ever seen."

A malignant smile spreads across Akira Nishino's face as he approaches Natsume.

"The magic hidden within this head in unbelievable. It has a quality to it that none of our magic does... The same way that *you* do."

He grabs Natsume's arm and pulls out a large syringe.

“The Brute ate from this head and evolved, and now it’s your turn to fuse with it and become the greatest knight in the world. Now, let’s get this show on the road. With this, you’ll be—”

A *ptchoo* rips through the air, and a bloodstain spreads across Akira Nishino’s white lab coat.

“Wha—?”

There’s another *ptchoo*, then another.

Akira Nishino’s body jerks back and forth as blood sprays around him and the smell of gunpowder smoke fills the air.

“Th-this can’t… It doesn’t…”

He drops to his knees.

There’s someone behind him holding a gun.

Their high heels audibly click, and they turn their aim to Natsume.

“N-no, don’t—”

Ptchoo. The gun recoils.

A dark hole appears on Natsume’s forehead. She collapses onto the bed.

Her death was instant.

Akira Nishino’s voice rises feebly from the ground. “Why? Why would you do this…?”

The figure turns their gun back to him.

Their eyes meet.

For a brief, fleeting moment, everything is silent.

“Death will come for you soon,” the assailant says. “I hope it hurts.”

They take the head and the syringe and leave.

“Heh… Heh-heh… Well, damn…”

A pool of blood spreads out across the white floor.

Akira Nishino can feel the heat in his body drain out alongside the blood.

“So, this is how it ends.”

As a researcher, he knows that his attacker was right. He’s a dead man.

“And I was so close, too…”

He finally got the material he needed for his research.

He was on the verge of making a warrior more powerful than even the Original Knight. And this time, he was going to be able to control it.

He reaches toward the empty air above him. His hand is wet with his own blood.

As his vision starts to fade, he looks over at the bed.

“Huh…?”

That’s when he sees the silver-haired girl abruptly sit up.

For a moment, he assumes it’s a hallucination brought about by his blood loss.

After all, he saw her get shot square in the forehead with his own two eyes.

However, the girl then stretches, stands up, and, in the blink of an eye, changes into an all-black outfit.

“What?”

Once again, he doesn't believe his eyes.

She changed into that black bodysuit in a single instant.

She goes on to pull a large black sack seemingly out of nowhere and starts packing stuff into it.

"M-my camera…"

One thing Akira Nishino spots is the camera that he thought he lost.

The girl stuffs his laptop inside the sack, then rummages around the room and takes every electrical appliance she can get her hands on.

The sack bulges as it gets fuller and fuller.

It's made of some material he's never seen. It's black, lustrous, and elastic.

"This one, and this one… Good, now room is all finished done. Next all is left is retrieve head," Natsume says. Her Japanese is oddly dubious.

"Y-you can talk?"

"Am many fluent," she says as un-fluently as can be. "Now, where data is? Am deleting."

"It's in a lab farther inside the building. Do what you like. I knew there were traces that the browser history had been edited, but I never imagined that *you* were the second rat…"

Natsume flashes him a radiant smile and walks past him.

"Just tell me…one last thing…," he chokes out. "Who are you people…?"

"We are the Shadow Garden," she replies in a low whisper. "We lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows."

She leaves without making a sound.

"The Shadow…Garden…huh…?"

He's never heard of them.

Do they operate overseas, maybe? Or are they perhaps the kind of organization that never shows its face in the light?

Either way, it means that there are groups in this world the likes of which Akira Nishino never dreamed of.

"I thought I was so close…but I guess…I was further than I thought…"

He looks over to the door the girl disappeared through—and then suddenly, she pops her head back in.

"Am you know FallenAngelofRebellion?" she asks him out of the blue.

"The Fallen Angel of Rebellion? Never heard of it…"

"Good. When I finding them, I kill. Marking my words."

And with that, she leaves. For good this time.

The Fallen Angel of Rebellion must be the organization the Shadow Garden is fighting against.

As Akira Nishino wonders who they could possibly be, he breathes his last.

The knights gather on the base's wall and begin fighting back against the beasts.

The beasts, in turn, drive their sharp claws into the wall and climb it practically like they're running. The knights' efforts to stop them are marred by exhaustion, and despair begins creeping into their expressions.

"Commander Haitani, there's too many of them! We can't hold them all off!"

Knight Commander Haitani has no reply for his soldiers' screams.

"What's going on? Where did all these beasts even come from?"

Haitani brandishes his sword. The beasts falter, and he moves in for the kill.

However, the wall below is covered with more just like it. The beasts' writhing ranks stretch all the way to the horizon.

There aren't supposed to be this many.

No normal stampede has anywhere near this many beasts.

Now, though, they're surging toward the base like they're being drawn to something.

Their numbers, their ferocity… Everything about the situation is abnormal.

"If only *she* were here… No, not even she would be enough to turn the tide…"

Haitani realizes he should stop talking.

Even though he's in the middle of a battle, there's still a chance someone might overhear him.

And besides, even if their strongest combatant, Akane Nishino, were there, it wouldn't be enough to stop the army of beasts knocking at their door.

At that point, Haitani realizes that he already knows how this battle is going to end.

The only thing waiting for them is their inevitable, inexorable defeat.

"Start evacuating the civilians."

"But Commander, if we do that—"

"All we can do now is buy time for them."

"You're saying we're abandoning the base?!"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Haitani has the eyes of a man who's already made his peace. "But we're not fighting so we can throw our lives away. We're fighting so that we can save as many others as we can."

"Commander…"

"I'm splitting the knight order into two groups. One group will be evacuating the civilians through the emergency tunnels. The other will stay here and buy them time."

"Y-yes, sir."

"You—you're in charge of the evacuation efforts. Remember, their lives are in your hands."

Haitani hates futility.

In his eyes, fighting futile battles and losing lives for nothing is a colossal waste.

If there's meaning in the fight, though, he's more than willing to put his life on the line.

Haitani is determined to fight until his dying breath if it means buying a single second more for the evacuating civilians.

However, even that determination can shatter under the weight of true despair.

That despair comes in the form of a roar that sounds like a thunderclap.

The terrible cry reverberates through everything, demanding the attention of all present.

Once it has it, the fearsome beast with its massive amounts of mana appears.

One stock-still knight's choked comment echoes across the battlefield. "I-it's the Brute…"

The beast's overgrown crimson claws and fangs stand stark against the darkness.

It inspires instinctual terror in any who behold it, like a demon straight out of the world of stories.

The Brute leaps too quickly for those awed by it to follow and swings its mighty claws.

The blow it inflicts is despair incarnate.

"What…?! The wall—!"

With but a single attack, the Brute's claws carve deep fissures into the university's bulwark.

If that wall goes down, the base will be defenseless. They'll get overrun in seconds.

They can picture it already.

Another claw strike cleaves through the night.

"N-noooo!"

The shout is powerless to stop the Brute.

It should be, anyhow.

Yet the Brute's crimson claw freezes unnaturally in midair.

Is it heeding that desperate cry?

No, of course not.

At long last, the knights notice the obsidian blade that the Brute is impaled on.

It's piercing the massive beast through from behind. Dark blood trickles down its tip.

A roar of agony erupts from the Brute's mouth.

Then, slowly…

…its massive frame rises into the air.

Slowly—ever so slowly—the blade hoists the Brute aloft.

The beast has been reduced to nothing more than a helpless sacrifice.

Then, under the moon's light, the obsidian blade flips over.

A moment later, the Brute splits in two. A torrent of black blood spills forth.

There, underneath it, stands the man holding the sword.

“I-it’s him…the Black Knight! The Black Knight is here!”

“H-he killed the Brute in a single blow!”

The quivering voices grow into an ever-expanding stir.

“I-is he here to help us…?”

The Black Knight holds his sword horizontally and squares off against the slavering horde of beasts.

Everyone falls silent again.

The knights’ eyes are fixed on the Black Knight’s each and every move.

They can tell that something is about to happen.

They don’t know what yet.

However, they can tell from the way the air curls around the Black Knight that it’s going to defy belief.

Nobody so much as twitches.

The only thing moving is the air.

Light—fathomless specks of light—gather around the Black Knight’s sword as he continues holding it level with the ground.

The light then swirls, spiraling in a bluish-purple glow as it converges at the blade’s tip.

A new bluish-purple sword extends forth.

It stretches across the ground, all the way to the horizon.

It seems to practically go on forever.

The Black Knight stoops low and draws the sword back.

His voice rumbles like it’s coming from the depths of the abyss as it echoes all through the area.

“I AM…”

A tremendous amount of mana gathers on the blade—

“…ATOMIC SWORD.”

—and the blade cleaves forth.

A flash of light bisects the night, shredding through all who stand within it.

In its wake, a bluish-purple afterglow drifts by and illuminates everything the sword sliced through.

Everything as far as the eye can see lies slain.

All of it—beasts, trees, and buildings alike—now has a perfect horizonal line cut through it.

“This isn’t possible… It *shouldn’t* be possible…”

It’s like God himself has come and divided the world into tops and bottoms. The onlooking knights are completely overwhelmed at the unbelievable gravity of what they’ve just witnessed.

“Who…? *What* is he…?” Haitani murmurs.

He can’t believe that the man who did this, the Black Knight, could possibly be human.

The Black Knight slowly begins to walk. His dark longcoat flutters in the night wind.

His boots click loudly against the ground as he advances toward the base.

“Eep…”

The knights turn and try to flee on reflex alone, and Haitani doesn’t even think of rebuking them.

He, too, knows that resistance is futile.

“…Open the gate,” he says.

“A-are you mad, Commander?! Wh-who knows what’ll happen if we let that thing inside?!”

“So? It’s not like we have any other options.”

“But, Commander…”

“None of us are powerful enough to so much as break his stride, so we have to gamble on whatever tiny chance we have. He did stop the stampede, if nothing else.”

As Haitani speaks, he descends the wall and opens the gate himself.

The Black Knight walks into the base without even hesitating.

The knights scramble over one another to get out of his way.

Not a single one of them tries to stop him.

The Black Knight keeps going like it’s the most natural thing imaginable.

Everyone present understands one thing—if anyone in the world can claim to be strong, it’s him.

“Hold…”

Haitani tries to speak to him.

However, his voice fails him.

He realizes, faintly, that it’s because he’s scared.

Finally, he manages to wring out a hoarse shout.

“H-hold on, please… What do you want? Why are you here at Messiah…?”

He fully expects to be ignored. The Black Knight might not have even heard him.

To his surprise, though, the Black Knight stops and murmurs softly. “The time has come. The door of darkness is cast open, and the world advances to a new field…”

Nobody present understands what he means.

However, his words have a weight to them that they can all comprehend.

The Black Knight knows everything, no doubt.

He knows why Japan became the way it did. Where the beasts came from. Everything. He sees the shape the world is yet to take.

Surely that’s why they don’t understand him.

“Who… Who exactly are you…?” Haitani asks as the Black Knight goes farther away.

“My name is Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows.”

“You lurk in the darkness…and hunt down shadows…”

Haitani watches him go.

He wonders if the day will ever come when he understands what Shadow means by that.

My black longcoat flutters as I vanish into the darkness.

It's the perfect exit—it's slow, it's unhurried, and it leaves behind the impression of absolute power.

"Heh-heh-heh… I *nailed* that!"

They're probably still trembling in awe at the eminence in shadow who appeared out of nowhere and obliterated the beasts with overwhelming force.

Plus, they'll spend ages pondering the mysterious words I left them with.

"Shadowbrokers never die. They live on forever in the hearts of those who witness their deeds."

As I stealthily watch my audience from a rooftop, I sense a familiar presence behind me.

"Beta… You've come," I say, switching back into my Shadow act.

She does her own Shadow Garden act and kneels before me.

"Did come yes. Was am late."

For some reason, she's talking in Japanese.

But why?

"I—I see you've learned Japanese…"

"Yes. Thanks to Lord Shah-dou am many fluent."

That's not exactly what I'd call fluent, but she's clearly competent enough to make herself understood.

That weird, choppy grammar of hers sort of reminds me of someone, but I can't put my finger on who.

None of my acquaintances immediately come to mind, though, so it's probably not that important.

But I gotta say, I wasn't expecting Beta to learn Japanese nearly this fast.

"Anyway…what's in the bag?"

She's carrying a huge bag made of slime on her back.

It looks sort of like Santa Claus lugging around his big sack of presents.

"I gathered the you-know-whats. Now we am be stronger."

"The you-know-whats…?"

Pretty sure I don't know any whats, but I guess she's just doing our standard routine.

"Many knowledge. Like you am said long ago, Lord Shah-dou. All knowledge am have common links. You was right! Sai-fur pattern am linked! Learned Japanese! Lots of many other links! Knowledge all connected! It are amazing!"

“Ah, yes. It all makes sense.”

That didn’t make any sense. All I got from that was that Beta’s Japanese blows.

“And how is the plan proceeding?”

There wasn’t actually a plan, but I feel like changing the subject.

We’re pretty far off-script at this point, yet Beta does a perfect job keeping up with my ad-libbing.

“Everything am in place. Did found what we looking for.”

“I see… So, everything is in place.”

“Door am open. Leader that way.”

“I see… So, the enemy leader is that way…”

When I turn my attention in the direction Beta’s pointing, I sense a pair of unusual magical signatures.

She must’ve gone and found the next big event for me.

You did good, Beta.

A shadowy figure runs down a dark underground tunnel.

They’re carrying a severed head, and every so often, they shoot a worried glance back over their shoulder.

Eventually, they come to a stop in front of a large wheeled suitcase at the end of the tunnel.

“It’s over… It’s finally over.”

The figure’s voice is female.

She retrieves a flashlight and uses its light to open the suitcase.

Inside, there’s a sleeping young woman hugging her knees.

The young woman has long black hair and is dressed in a knight order uniform. It’s Akane Nishino.

“This is all your fault. Everything that happened, everything that’s about to happen…it’s all because of you,” the shadowy woman says to her.

She sets down the head and pulls something shaped like a syringe from her pocket.

That’s when a new voice echoes through the tunnel.

“Looks like I was right. You *were* the culprit.”

It belongs to a boy.

“Who’s there?!”

The shadowed woman whirls back and shines her flashlight toward where the voice came from.

Its light reveals the boy standing in the darkness. He has black hair and eyes, and looks utterly unassuming. He’s the kind of average young man you could find just about anywhere.

“Minoru…? How are you here?”

“You probably thought I was dead, didn’t you…Dr. Yuuka?”

"……"

The woman's expression freezes.

Sure enough, she's the base's lab coat–clad physician, Dr. Yuuka.

"I mean, you *are* the one who gave the order to have me killed."

"…That's right, I am. Clever work, figuring that out."

"I take it you killed the gor…Saejima, too?"

She admits it matter-of-factly. "That's right."

"It was weird, you know. I hadn't done anything to make people want to attack me. The only explanation that made sense was if you were the killer."

"I see they didn't finish the job."

"Nope. I'm still alive and kicking. Why'd you do it, Doc?"

Dr. Yuuka smiles coldly. "You want an *explanation*?"

She pulls a pistol from her lab coat's pocket and points it at Minoru.

"…That the gun you used to kill Saejima?"

"The very same. Killing him was like taking candy from a baby. When their guards are down, knights are just ordinary people. You can kill with nothing more than a little…*bang*."

She pulls the trigger.

A bullet bounces off the ground by Minoru's feet, sending up a little shower of sparks.

Minoru doesn't so much as twitch, a fact that she regards with some surprise. "You don't scare easy, do you? Or are you just *so* scared you can't even move?"

"Why'd you kill him?"

"He was our inside man. Once we had what we needed, we got rid of him," she answers with a bewitching smile.

"We?"

"I'm a spy for the Alliance."

"Oh, I see. So, what, you're after the base?"

"That's what the Alliance is after, certainly. But not me." She clenches her fists. "My goal is revenge."

"What do you mean?"

"Where to start… Do you know who she really is, deep down inside?"

Dr. Yuuka looks down at Akane's sleeping body.

"She's a very bad girl who killed loads and loads of people."

"Huh."

The boy sounds almost nonchalant. Dr. Yuuka's expression harshens. "You don't believe me. You think I'm lying, don't you?"

"What? No. I'm sure you're—"

"Fine. I'll tell you everything. Let's see how you feel once you know about the way she slaughtered them."

"I mean, hey, if you want to."

Dr. Yuuka's lips contort as she begins telling her story. Her expression hasn't softened one bit. "I used to live in Arcadia with my husband. Things

weren't easy, but we were happy. Now, my husband was a researcher. He studied the Awakened alongside Akira Nishino."

"Okay…"

"One day, their research bore fruit, and they created the first knight in all of Japan—a girl with black hair and red eyes who they called the Original Knight."

She stares down at Akane Nishino as she speaks.

That strikes me as odd. "If I remember correctly, I thought I heard that the Original Knight had golden hair."

"In the beginning, her hair was dark. But Akira Nishino wasn't satisfied with her power. He began dabbling in forbidden research in an attempt to make her even stronger. That was what turned her hair golden."

"Oh, huh…"

"And she became powerful, all right. Eventually, though, that power grew out of her control. My husband tried over and over to stop Akira Nishino, but he never could. And that's when it happened."

She hangs her head. Her lips are quivering.

"One day, the Original Knight went on a rampage and massacred the people of Arcadia. My husband was one of the victims; I held him in my arms as he died. I followed Akira Nishino and the Original Knight after that, and when I found them a few years later, do you know what they were doing? Continuing their research like nothing had changed. They destroyed Arcadia and killed my husband, and I intend to make them pay."

She grinds her teeth as she goes on.

"I already put down Akira Nishino. Once I'm through with the Original Knight, it'll all be over. And in case it wasn't clear enough by now, *she's* the Original Knight."

She looks down at the girl cradling her knees in her sleep.

"…Are you going to kill her?"

"Death would be too good for her. After all the horrors she wrought, now she's trying to forget about what she did. Well, I'm not going to let her. I'm going to force her to remember everything…"

Dr. Yuuka presses the tip of the syringe against Akane's neck and glares at Minoru.

"You stay right where you are. Do you know what kinds of experiments Akira Nishino was performing on this girl? He made the Original Knight by injecting her with purified beast bodily fluids a tiny bit at a time. She's a monster with human and beast bits all mixed up inside her. Now, what do you think will happen…if I inject her with fluids from the Brute?"

She sticks the syringe in and deposits its payload.

Akane's eyes snap open.

Her slender body convulses, and golden magic begins pouring out of her.

By the time she's risen to her feet, her hair gleams gold.

"Now this…*this* is who you *really* are."

Dr. Yuuka’s mouth curls into a cruel smile. Akane turns her glassy eyes on her.

Akane’s face is expressionless, and her eyes are cold and blank.

She casually thrusts her right arm forward.

Her arm moves like it’s being drawn to something, then pierces Dr. Yuuka’s heart.

Dr. Yuuka doesn’t resist.

Instead, she just slumps forward onto Akane and whispers in her ear.

“…This is my revenge.”

She laughs. Her lips are wet with blood.

Then, she crumples at the knees and laughs until the last life fades from her.

“Ah… Ahh… Ah…”

Akane’s eyes swim.

Trembling, she looks down at her arm soaked in red.

“Ahhhh… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

She tears at her hair with her bloody hand.

Her screams are tinged with sorrow.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Golden particles scatter from her body. They envelop her surroundings, then explode.

Akane Nishino feels like she’s gazing at some sort of distant, far-off world.

In her heart, however, she knows that it’s all happening right in front of her.

She knows all too well that the sensation of her arm rending flesh and the sight of Dr. Yuuka collapsing are both terribly real.

She knows, because she remembers having the same thing happen long ago.

She wonders what, exactly, happened back then.

She wonders how many people she killed.

Recollections flood back right as the feeling in her arm does.

“Ahhhh… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The memories are etched deep in her heart. They’ll never go away.

She crushed towns, slaughtered people, and destroyed Arcadia, all because she couldn’t control her magic and her urges.

It felt like she was gazing at a distant, far-off world back then, too.

Because of that, she knows what’s about to happen.

She can feel her magic starting to run wild.

It hurts.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Golden particles swallow her surroundings, then explode.

The black-haired boy gets caught in the blast and goes flying.

“Ah… Ahhh…”

By the time her magic finally settles down, everything in a dome around her is destroyed.

Rubble lies piled high around her, and she can see the stars through the newly formed hole above.

The black-haired boy is nowhere to be seen.

Akane stands there petrified.

Yet despite the profound sorrow in her heart, she can't get her expression to change. That fact hurts, too.

Then, she hears something behind her.

She turns and sees a man in a black longcoat standing atop the towering debris.

It's the Black Knight.

The moon hangs high at his back as he draws his obsidian blade.

"It's a fine night for severing one's past…"

He raises his sword toward the sky.

A gust of wind blows between the two of them.

"Here I come."

With that, he swoops through the sky.

No…stay back!

Akane's body moves on its own, heedless of her internal screams.

Golden magic wells forth from her entire body. She soars into the air.

The swooping black and soaring gold collide.

And when they do…the gold smashes through the black.

Another person dead by her hands.

Akane looks down at the arm she used to pierce the Black Knight and feels a wave of something almost like resignation wash over her.

Her arm is covered in a black, sticky liquid.

It's the Black Knight's blood. No, wait…that isn't right.

A voice comes from behind her. "That was my afterimage."

She whirls around and finds the Black Knight standing there as calm as can be.

She's positive she felt her arm stab the Black Knight through, yet he doesn't have so much as a scratch on him.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Her body rushes forward, determined to hunt the Black Knight.

Midway through her charge, however, she comes to a sudden stop.

She doesn't know when they got there, but there are chains winding around her arms and legs and restricting her movement.

She thinks back to the black liquid she found on her arm. Did he do that to set *this* up?

"Agahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Her magic struggles and tries to lash out, and he chides her in a tranquil tone. "It's no use. None can escape the prison of black chains."

His boots clop against the ground as he slowly approaches her.

Bluish-purple magic gathers at his black blade.

It's terrible and beautiful to behold.

Akane is stunned speechless.

She realizes then that she's going to die there.

It's all finally going to be over.

Her body rages, but her heart is calm.

He brings his blade down, and Akane's vision floods with bluish-purple light.

As her consciousness starts fading, she hears a familiar voice.

"…From now on, try to stop getting kidnapped so much."

Beta watches through a gap in the rubble as the bluish-purple magic heals Akane.

"Tee-hee-hee… This am magnificent."

She uses the digital camera in her right hand to capture an image of her esteemed master, and at the same time, uses her left hand to write out passages of *The Chronicles of Master Shadow*. It's quite the party trick.

"This camera can preserve Lord Shadow's image in all its majestic glory. Is am like this device were invented just for me."

She wipes away the drool running down her chin before packing up the camera and her manuscript.

Seeing that her master has reached a good stopping point, she calls over to him.

"We're all ready to going, my lord."

He calmly turns toward her. "Ah, Beta."

"Are the plan complete?" she asks.

"Huh? Uh, yeah. Sure."

"Very well. Then I starting."

With that, Beta fishes the severed head out of the rubble.

She's already finished analyzing the Black Rose.

"Oh…?"

"I going like this… And like this, probably… All done!"

She tosses the head into the air, imbues her sword with magic, and uses it to impale the head.

Darkness begins spilling out, forming a growing black hole.

"Ooh… I didn't really follow that, but good work, Beta."

"Y-you're too kind, my lord! It were nothing!"

Beta is so moved by the unexpected compliment, her whole body trembles before she can stop herself.

"All right, let's get out of here. Like, right now. Chop chop, no time to waste."

"Yes, sir."

"Here we go, Beta! Geronimo!"

Without hesitating for a moment, her lord leaps directly into the black hole.

Beta watches him go, but right as she's about to follow his lead, she realizes something.

“This…willn’t fit.”

The black sack she’s lugging around is packed so tight and full it looks like a small mountain.

Inside are all the tools and documents she’s collected during her time in Japan.

The plan was to take them all back with her so she could study them, but there’s one problem—the black hole is too small.

It’s barely large enough for *her* to fit through, let alone all her loot.

And to make matters worse, it’s slowly but surely starting to shrink. In a couple minutes, it’ll be completely closed.

“*Sniff*... But I collecteding so much…”

Tears well up in her eyes as she opens her sack and dumps out its contents.

She begins scouring the pile for anything small enough she can carry with her by hand.

“This one… Not this one… Definitely not this one… This one maybe fitting… Hmm?”

Then, all of a sudden, she registers the presence of the young woman on the ground.

Thanks to the way Beta’s master healed her, the young woman’s hair has returned from its previous golden hue back to its original beautiful shade of black. She’s sleeping peacefully on the ground.

“I just getting a good idea.”

A wicked smile spreads across Beta’s face as she looks down at the resting woman.

There’s only so much she can take with her.

That means she needs to prioritize the most valuable resources and sources of knowledge she can find.

“The best thing to bringing is a local specimen!”

Beta swaddles the raven-haired woman in slime and packs her in with a few smaller devices, as well as the digital camera.

“In we going, now.”

She stuffs the black bag into the hole, then jumps in after it.

“Shadow is back?”

At the moment, Alpha is listening to a report while in the director’s office of the Mitsugoshi Deluxe Hotel.

The moment she heard about Shadow getting sucked into the Black Rose, she immediately rushed over to the Oriana Kingdom to take charge of the damage control operation.

“M-M-M-M-M-Master Shadow is back?!”

Epsilon, who's working beside her, stands up so fast she knocks her chair over.

"Calm yourself, Epsilon."

"B-but, Alpha…"

"He had some sort of important objective he was carrying out, and we knew he had the resources for his return close at hand. There was never any doubt about whether or not he would be back."

"I—I guess you're right. I'm so glad he's safe, though."

"Where is he now?" Alpha asks Victoria, who's standing in front of the door.

"He's heading for the Midgar Kingdom in quite a hurry."

"Why the rush?"

"He seemed to be concerned about how soon the academy's winter vacation was ending."

"I see. There might be something important happening there, then. Something related to the Cult, or perhaps even Diablos…"

"Understood, ma'am. I should note that Zeta is with him."

"Zeta? When did she get back?"

"Unclear, ma'am."

Alpha lets out a small sigh. "That girl has skills, I'll give her that, but she really does need to report in more often."

"Also, Beta returned as well. She says she brought a number of interesting things back with her."

"Ah, so they *did* go in with an objective. Where is she?"

"She's—"

Before Victoria can finish her sentence, the door swings open and a silver-haired girl comes in.

"I'm back, everyone!"

"Good work out there," Alpha says. "Actually, before I compliment you, I have to ask—what's that?"

Beta is dragging a large black bag along behind her.

"Let's see," she says and starts proudly pulling out various electronics. "I have a digital camera, a laptop, a tablet… And they're all amazing! I mean, we're talking about some revolutionary gadgets here! All they need is electricity, and they can do all sorts of things!"

Alpha points at the conspicuously human-shaped blob. "That's all fascinating, but I was actually asking about the one that looks like a person."

Epsilon nods in agreement.

"This is, um…" Beta pauses and tilts her head in thought. "A… knowledge…sample? Or rather, a manual, maybe? Something along those lines."

"I have to say, it looks a lot like a human being."

“Well, I haven’t looked into it with any proper rigor, but to be precise, she’s a specimen from the other world—one that I suspect is *nigh indistinguishable* from a human.”

Beta’s pedantic reply earns her a furrowed brow from Alpha. “Well, make sure you take proper care of her.”

“Who, me? I was just going to hand her over to Eta…”

“You found her, so she’s your responsibility. Once you start something, it’s important to see it through. And besides, who knows what Eta would do to her if given free rein?”

Beta hangs her head despondently. “Th-that’s a fair point…”

“You can fill me in on all the details later. Write up a report about everything that happened over there and all the things you brought back.”

“O-of course. I’ll get started at once.”

“Also, there’s something you should know. As far as the situation with Number 666 goes…”

The Shadow Garden’s board of directors meeting continues until late in the night.

Akane wakes up in a white room.

She feels good. Really good. Her heart is calm, and she can’t remember the last time she woke up feeling so refreshed.

“Where am I…?”

She looks around the room.

At first, she thinks she’s in one of the university’s labs, but the equipment here is too primitive for that.

“I can’t…I can’t read anything.”

There’s something written on the wall, but she doesn’t even recognize what language it’s in.

“What happened to me back there…?”

Akane remembers everything.

She remembers her sins, she remembers accepting death, she remembers the gentle light and his voice enveloping her at the end—everything.

Her heart is calm enough now to accept things as they are.

“…I’m so sorry.”

The apology is directed at those she wronged.

Dr. Yuuka, the people of Arcadia… All of them died by her hands.

Her brother might have been the one who started it all, but the way she sees it, it was her own weakness that exacerbated the damage.

She’s wanted to come to terms with the past for so long, but she’s never had the strength to do so.

Now, however, she does.

“That was you, Minoru…wasn’t it?”

His was the voice she heard. She’s sure of it.

“I know you survived. You never change, do you…?”

A single tear trickles down from the corner of her eye.

If he’s still alive, then she can be strong.

“Wait for me, Minoru. I…I killed a lot of people, but I’m going to save so many more. So please, just wait for me to finish atoning…”

And with that, golden particles begin drifting around her.

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 4

Appendix

Appendix

Victoria

“It’s my duty to purge any who are unworthy of his grace.”

Name: Victoria

Gender: Female

Age: 18

Number 559 of the Shadow Garden. She almost died after contracting the possession, but Shadow saved her, at which point she became unsettlingly devoted to him. Her strength has earned her praise from even the Seven Shadows, and many expect her to eventually assume a leadership role, although others worry that her fanaticism makes her dangerous. There are a lot of mysteries surrounding her origins, but apparently, she was once hailed as a saint.

No.664 No.665

Name: Number 665

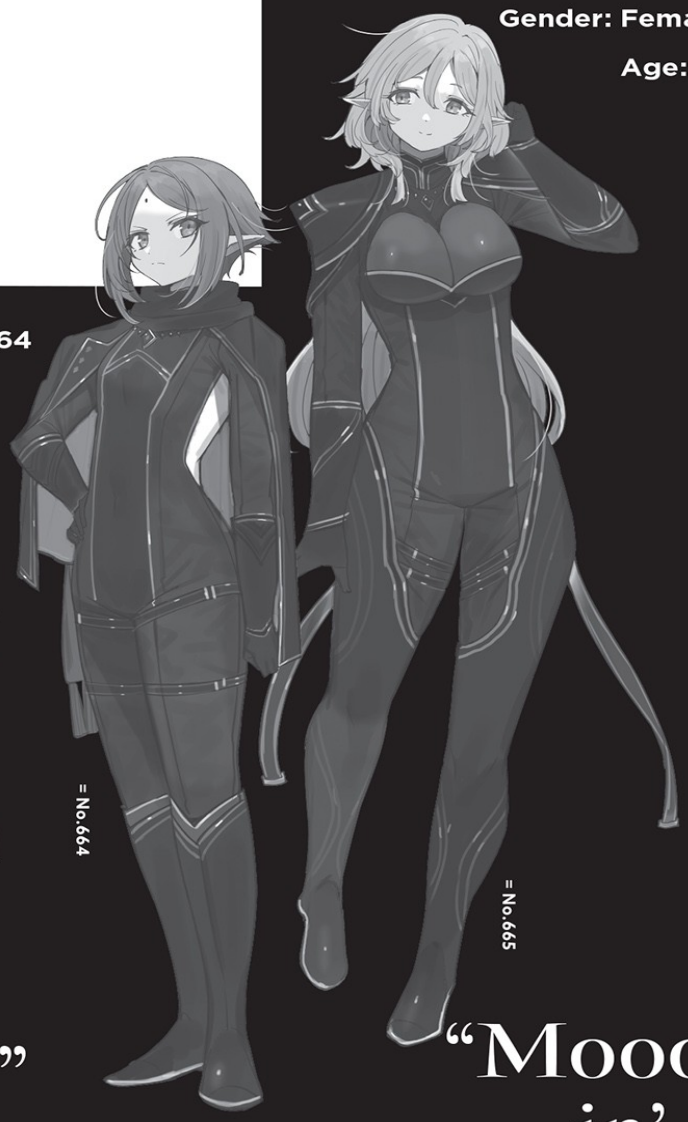
Gender: Female

Age: 17

Name: Number 664

Gender: Female

Age: 18

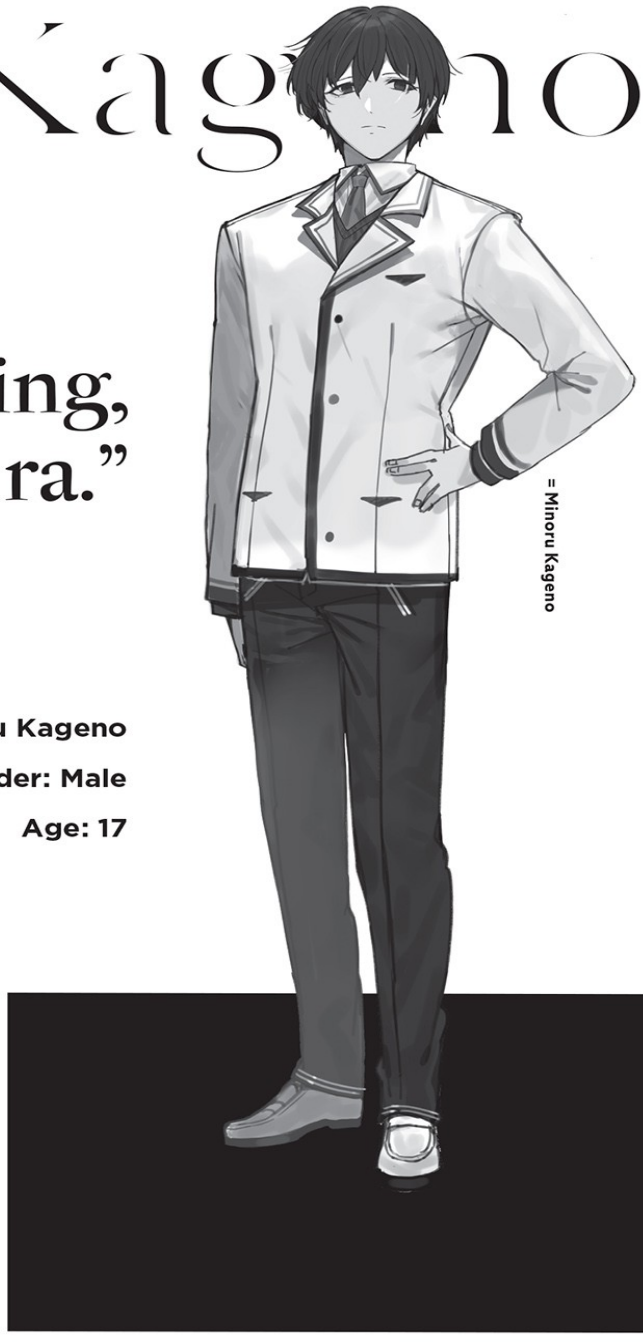


“You really, *really* can’t act on your own, got it?”

“Mooorn-in’, 666.”

Rose’s squadmates and two of the newest members of the Shadow Garden. Number 664, the squad captain, is strict with her teammates but has a heart of gold. Number 665 has an easygoing personality and is good at backing others up. The two of them are still pretty inexperienced, but they’ve been getting good marks from their instructor, so people expect great things from them.

Minoru Kageno



= Minoru Kageno

“Morning, Nishimura.”

Name: Minoru Kageno

Gender: Male

Age: 17

Cid’s past self. He did his best to play the role of an unremarkable high school student by keeping his grades just below average. He devoted most of his free time to training but ended up having so few opportunities to use his skills that he resorted to spending his nights hunting down hoodlums and gangs. He always made sure to keep a crowbar in his backpack wherever he went.

Akane Nishino

= Akane Nishino

Name: Akane Nishino

Gender: Female

Age: 20

"When I'm with you, I start thinking about the past... It's weird, right?"

One of Minoru Kageno's high school classmates. She was born into the Nishino Zaibatsu and spent some time working as an actress. People adore her and call her the Savior on account of her exceptional magical aptitude, although she doesn't like the moniker one bit. Minoru Kageno has swooped in to save her more than a couple of times. Does she have some inkling of who the Fancy Hoodlum Slayer is...?

The Chronicles of Master Shadow

Complete Version: Volume IV

By Beta

We followed the Cult of Diablos's wicked trail all the way to the Oriana Kingdom. Epsilon headed up an elite infiltration squad and tried to figure out what the Cult was after, but we couldn't find any conclusive proof of what they were doing, and time was ticking away. We ended up following a minor lead and deploying Victoria's and Rose Oriana's squads to Fort First. That let us discover that they were after the key, but Rose Oriana got captured, and Victoria fell into grave danger.

But then, Master Shadow made his gallant arrival! Having predicted the Cult's moves in advance, he swooped in and saved us from our predicament. And oh, how elegant he looked as he slew a member of the Cult's leadership in the blink of an eye!

Upon learning of Rose Oriana's capture, he headed straight for the royal capital and joined up with Epsilon. Preparations for the wedding between Rose Oriana and Perv Asshat were well underway, and Master Shadow—having seen through the Cult's entire plan—masterfully stole the key away from Perv! And not only that, he decided to let them think they were getting away with everything so he could destroy the evil at its source!

From there, he revealed the truth in its entirety to Rose Oriana and entrusted her with the key.

That's right—it wasn't our place to determine Oriana's fate. Master Shadow was using his actions to show Rose Oriana that the only way her nation could recover was by having its rightful successor make the call! Roused by his message, Rose Oriana struck Perv Asshat down, thereby restoring the Oriana Kingdom's pride.

In short, everything played out exactly the way Master Shadow wanted it to!

It seemed like everything had been tied up with a bow, but that was when the puppet master from the Cult decided to show his face. As it turned out, the Knights of Rounds' ninth member—Sir Mordred, the Knight Beyond Men—was behind everything! He opened the Black Rose's gate and summoned a horde of magical beasts as well as the powerful Ragnarok! This was the Cult's true goal all along…but once again, they were dancing on the palm of Master Shadow's hand. He had seen it all coming, and he trounced Ragnarok with ease and tricked Sir Mordred into revealing the world's true nature. And on top of that, he shattered all the Cult's schemes and destroyed the Black Rose in its entirety!

No, wait, he didn't. As it turned out, his designs went even further than that! Nobody could look away as he dove straight into the Black Rose as it crumbled. It is with great shame I must admit that even I, Beta, feared for a brief moment that my lord had become deranged! Be that as it may, though, I was prepared, as I always am, to follow my lord in any and all situations. And when I went after him and leaped into the Black Rose myself…I found myself in a whole other world.

That's right—that's what Master Shadow was after the entire time. He knew that by taking knowledge and power from a different

world, the Shadow Garden could become stronger than ever! The first proof of his marvelous intentions was the way his intellect shone in the alien realm we found ourselves in. Not only did he decipher the local language in the blink of an eye, all it took him was a single glance to intuit the purposes of every strange device we came across! That right there is what makes Master Shadow so incredible—his thorough knowledge of everything and his ability to understand the true nature of a thing in nary a moment! When I saw how wise he looked when he topped it all off by fluently speaking the new world's language, I must admit, it sent my heart aflutter!

After he used his masterful "stay flexible and play things by ear" plan to get us accepted into a local community, I accepted a mission to steal as much knowledge and technology from the locals as I could. Then, he got our hosts to take me into the very heart of their organization. Everything was set up brilliantly for me, and failure wasn't an option. Knowing that, I did my utmost to learn the local language as quickly as possible, and that was when I stumbled upon a shocking truth. As it turned out, the local language bore a striking resemblance to the one that Master Shadow used in the cipher he once gave me! Then, I thought back to his teachings.

"All knowledge is connected."

Master Shadow himself was the one who told me that—that across different cultures and even across different worlds, the fundamental truths people will arrive at are always the same!

From there, it all clicked in an instant. All the language there, all the tools, all the technology... It was all connected to everything I'd ever learned! Especially all the knowledge Master Shadow imparted to me! Knowing that let me emulate him, and now that I understood the true nature of what I was looking at, I was able to steal knowledge by the armful. I had become more insightful at a pace that shocked even me, and it was all thanks to Master Shadow's teachings!

Meanwhile, the petty locals were starting to kill one another, so we took advantage of the confusion to retrieve Mordred's head. An individual named ⛧FallenAngelofRebellion⛧ was making fun of Master Shadow in an online forum, so I would have liked to kill them before we left...but sadly, we were out of time. If I ever get the chance, I'm going to pulverize ⛧FallenAngelofRebellion⛧ so badly they'll wish they had never been born.

After all, none can be allowed to sully Master Shadow's hallowed name!

That's all for this installment, but we'll be back soon in *The Chronicles of Master Shadow, Complete Version: Volume V*!

Next time, we'll be returning to Midgar Academy—and learning of the shocking event that takes place there!

Stay tuned for more of Master Shadow's grand endeavors!!

Afterword

Thank you all for reading Volume 4 of *The Eminence in Shadow*.

I'd like to start out by apologizing for the long wait. The problem is, I had writer's block. There was a long period where I didn't know what I should write—what would be *right* to write—and I ended up not making any progress at all.

I've been doing the whole web novel thing more or less since I started writing, and over time, my writing style has gradually shifted to one that's more suited to that format. In other words, I would regularly check in with the readers and make edits and sometimes rework entire plotlines based on their feedback. Even if their opinions differ from mine, if enough of them are in agreement, I feel like the right thing to do is to respect how they feel. To this day, I still believe that, and I make a point of only doing things "my way" in the course of moving the story along the way the readers want. That's the writing style my web novel days have fostered in me.

However, that gave me problems when I decided to have Volume 4 go off in its own direction. Without the ability to post a chapter at a time and make changes by looking at the readers' reactions, I found myself at a loss for how to proceed. I would write a little, then end up deleting it all and starting over from scratch. That went on for over a year.

In the past, my stories weren't something I wrote on my own. They were something I built together with my readers.

I really am sorry for keeping you all waiting for such a long time, but I did ultimately finish the book and send it off to be published. I'd like to extend a heartfelt thank-you to my editor, who sacrificed hours of their valuable time each day to help me get over my slump.

Now, I do have a special announcement for you all. As it turns out, *The Eminence in Shadow* will be getting an anime adaptation! This would never have been possible if not for the support you all have shown for the series. My time during the slump made me truly understand just how important you all are. A huge thank-you to every one of you.

I'm getting to the end here, so I'd like to say some more words of gratitude.

Thank you to my editor for helping me through the entire publication process. Thank you to Touzai for the best illustrations I could ever hope for. My thanks to Araki at BALCOLONY. for the incredible designs that adorn this book. I'd also like to thank everyone working on the anime. And last, I'd

like to thank my readers for their support. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.

Let’s meet again in Volume 5!

Daisuke Aizawa

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